

# ***The Warrior of Ephes Dammim***

**When Teenagers Overcome  
Their Giants**

**Russell Lingerfelt**

Published by  
J.C. Choate Publications  
Winona/Singapore/New Delhi/Cebu City/Jakarta/Cape Town

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Cover Design: Betty Burton Choate  
Layout: Barbara A. Oliver

First Printing, 2004

**Order From:**

**James Russell Ministries**

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**For God**

**To Dad, Mom, and Wayne**

# *Foreword*

What a wonderful experience it was for me to read **The Warrior of Ephes Dammim**. In this book, James Russell Lingerfelt has given us a unique glimpse into the life and times of today's teenager. Written in first person, it's almost as if he has invited you and me to sit down and read his diary as he shares interesting experiences and how these events have impacted his spiritual life. He beautifully weaves together everyday stories against an eternal backdrop. The reader is not made to feel preached to, but rather included in a conversation with a friend.

The stories are realistic, which makes it easy to relate to this book. Several of the people mentioned and several of the episodes related reminded me of people and happenings from my past. In that regard, reading this book is a moving experience.

Perhaps the greatest satisfaction I gained from reviewing this manuscript was the realization that these thoughts were expressed by a young mind. That means at least two things — (1) somebody has done a good job training (parents, grandparents, minister, coaches, etc.) and (2) the future looks bright; we have deeply spiritual young people coming along who have a passion to be warriors for Christ. I predict great things for the kingdom of God because of the difference that Russell will make with his life!

Dr. Donnie Hilliard, Director  
Cloverdale Center for Family Strengths  
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# *Introduction*

**“Many times a day I realize how much my own outer and inner life is built upon the labors of my fellow men, both living and dead, and how earnestly I must exert myself in order to give in return as much as I have received.” — Albert Einstein**

**T**his book is not an autobiography. It is a blue-print written by a youth, about the youth, for the youth, so that youth can win where youth won and stand where youth fell. If by reading this book your life is helped, then it is worth the four years of persistence I have taken to ensure its completion and publication.

I wanted to write a book that I wish had been available to me through the most challenging times of my life: the teenage years. Imagine lifting a book from the shelf and finding in it fragments of your most beloved authors, your most cherished messages, memories from your life and the lives of those around you. A book that says everything you wish you could say to not only this generation but also the one following. Such a book is this for me.

As you read, you will discover the echoes of both past and modern writers whose works have kept me awake burning the midnight oil. You may sense Stephen Covey, Dr. James Dobson, Elizabeth Elliot, Benjamin Franklin, Joshua Harris, C. S. Lewis, Max Lucado, Beth Moore, Mark Twain, and many others. Every pupil reflects a measure of his or her master(s).

I hope you enjoy reading it as much as I have enjoyed writing it. I pray that I can give to you what was given me: love and instruction.

December 26, 2003  
Auburn University

Russell Lingerfelt

## *A Short Note Before We Get Started*

Throughout this book you may discover numbers such as <sup>1</sup> or <sup>2</sup> and the like. Many of these numbers represent additional writings concerning the subject, found in the back of the book under a section titled “Notes”.

“...the deadly thing was that school life was a life almost wholly dominated by the social struggle; to get on, to arrive, or, having reached the top, to remain there, was the absorbing preoccupation. It is often, of course, the preoccupation of adult life as well; but I have not yet seen any adult society in which the surrender to this impulse was so total. And from it, at school as in the world, all sort of meanness flow; the sycophancy that courts those higher in the scale, the cultivation of those whom it is well to know, the speedy abandonment of friendships that will not help on the upward path, the readiness to join the cry against the unpopular, the secret motive in almost every action.”

C.S. Lewis  
**Surprised by Joy**

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# *The Warrior of Ephes Dammim*

**When Teenagers Overcome  
Their Giants**



## Chapter 1

# *A Daydream*

**“I come into the fields and spacious palaces of my memory, where are treasures of countless images of things of every manner.” — St. Augustine, 5th century**

The sweat fell from my nose as I stood at the half-court line.

Skyline’s high school gymnasium was filled with parents and athletes from across the district — there to observe Section’s team — the team everyone assumed would defeat us in this Area Tournament. And why should Section not defeat us? They had done so twice that year.

Throughout the entire game we thought we might actually claim the victory. From the beginning of warm-ups, Section’s players had been acting silly, not taking a thing seriously, believing they had already won the battle. But our faces were grim. We were ready for war. Those pre-game stomach flutters, the adrenaline, and an anxious spirit are all feelings that I remember.

We led the game at times, and we fought hard. But near the end of the fourth quarter, Section took the lead and dominated us.

Thirty-five seconds were left to play, and we were down by seventeen points.

There was a short break in the game due to a foul, and one of my teammates was about to shoot two free-throws.

Blood slowly slithered onto my tongue from a busted lip.

I would not let the referees see my mouth. They would have taken me from the game.

I could barely breathe. My heartbeat pounded in my ears like a drum.

My lungs felt as if someone were standing on them.

The shouts and screams from the fans seemed distant, almost non-existent; like voices in a dream.

I placed my hands on my knees, bowed my head and watched my sweat drip onto the half-court line.

Memories sped through my mind at a million thoughts per second.

Images of Tim swept before my eyes; his voice echoed in my mind.

*"Everything will be alright. Russell, everything will soon be fine."*

I scanned the crowd. There was my mother with the video camera, filming my last game. She had gladly recorded every one of my basketball games since my third-grade year. My dad and my big brother, Wayne, were hidden in the crowd. They never missed a single game. A big part of my life was about to end. Years of training had come down to this game. I had worked hard to get where I was.

My life as a Christian teenager had its trials as well. I look back on all my years as an athlete and as a Christian. It is hard to place my finger on when it all began...

I was helping with a youth conference in Huntsville, Alabama one winter weekend. During the lunch break, someone tapped me on the shoulder. I turned to find a boy with dark hair, black-rim glasses, and about shoulder-height to me.

"Russell, I need to talk to you about something."

I had spoken with this boy before, but I could not recall his name. After meeting teenagers at various youth rallies and conventions, it is hard to remember names.

We found a secluded ballroom where we could be alone, and I shut the door behind us. There was no one to hear our conversation, no noises to distract us, no one to interrupt. We sat down in two fold-out chairs, and I leaned in to give "Brad" my full attention. He lowered his head and through tears, he poured out his heart.<sup>1</sup>

“There is this guy at school. Every time he sees me, he calls me names. It doesn’t matter who he’s with, he cusses me or says something. I can’t say anything around him because he cuts me down. It didn’t bother me at first but I can’t take it anymore. I dread going back to school ‘cause I’ll have to hear him again. I tried ignoring him, but I can’t anymore. I don’t know what to do.”

I had heard similar stories before — from many teenagers. Classmates had laughed at their victim’s weight, stature, the way they walked, the way they talked, or the way they dressed. I guess some people can make sport of anyone or anything if they try hard enough.

“What do you think Jesus would do in this situation?” I asked.

Brad wiped the tears from his face with his hand. His voice cracked as he strained to answer, “Show him love?”

I replied, “And how would He have done that?”

Brad rested his chin in his hands and stared at the floor, his tears subsiding and he concentrated.

He said to me, “Jesus would’ve talked to him.”

I answered, “Alone or in front of everyone?”

Brad answered, “Alone. And He would’ve asked the guy why he was saying those things.”

I replied, “I think so too. Why do you think Jesus would’ve pulled him aside and not shout back at him in front of everyone?”

Brad looked up at me and said, “Because if Jesus did it in front of everyone, then the guy would feel like he had to show out...to impress everybody.”

I smiled and patted him on the shoulder.

“That’s right. You see, by pulling the guy aside and confronting him

alone, he's away from his friends, and there is no one to impress. It's just the two of you. And impressing his friends might be the reason he's treating you like he is. If there is no one around, he may actually listen to you. And you might make a friend out of an enemy."

Brad shook his head and said, "I haven't tried that."

I had expected Brad to say, "I don't want to be his friend. I'd like to punch his face." And to be honest, I would not have blamed him. There is a time to fight. The Holy Scriptures say so.<sup>2</sup> But fighting should be the last resort.

I opened my Bible and said, "I want to give you some scriptures, okay?"

Brad nodded his head, took out his pen and his Bible.

**"Moreover, if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained a brother" (Matthew 18:15).**

**"If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat; and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink; for so you will heap coals of fire on his head, and the Lord will reward you" (Proverbs 25:21,22).**

**"Do not say, 'I will recompense evil'; wait for the Lord and He will save you" (Proverbs 20:22).**

**"When a man's ways please the Lord, He makes even his enemies to be at peace with him" (Proverbs 16:7).**

Brad read the verses aloud and marked them with his pen.

I continued, "I want you to know, Brad, that if God created us, then He knows how we operate and how we are influenced. So these Scriptures are great guidelines in dealing with that kid at school. And these are only a few verses. The Bible is filled with thousands of Scriptures that will help you in your life. That's why its so important to read the entire Bible. Do you understand?"

Brad nodded, smiled, gave me a hug, and walked away wiping the evidence of his grief from his face.

## Chapter 2

# *Faps, Rebels, and Popularity*

**“I didn’t belong as a kid, and that always bothered me. If only I’d known that one day my differentness would be an asset, then my early life would have been much easier.” — Bette Midler**

I was raised in the small town of Fyffe, Alabama, much like Mayberry on the “Andy Griffith” show. Fyffe is located in the northeast corner of Alabama, atop the musty-blue foothills of the Appalachian Mountains. Population, 1100. Cool springs, summers ranging from humid to dry, crisp autumns, and snowy winters. Throughout my high school years, our main street consisted of one caution light and a handful of stores. Fyffe did not install a stop light until a year after I had graduated from high school. I lived with my parents and my older brother, Wayne, who was three years older than I, about fifteen miles outside Fyffe, near “Greens Chapel Crossing”, which included a grocery store and a small country church.

Wayne and I rarely spent a dull moment during our lives in the countryside. The forest and pasture lands offered a quiet get-away when we desired serenity. The only sounds were the songs and chirps of wood sparrows, blue birds, and whippoorwills. The long fields of tall, bright green grass were scattered with clusters of yellow wild flowers.

We would ride our bicycles across those fields to the edge of the forest, away from all evidence of humanity. The slow-paced life as a boy. The inner stillness of the forest long forgotten. Long missed. There, Wayne and I would sit and watch the grass wave in the wind. Reedy Creek lay just beyond that field, perhaps one hundred yards into the forest. Our afternoons were spent swimming, fishing, and tipping over the large rocks at the edge of the banks in hopes of catching crawfish. Wayne was my hero. He reminded me of Zorro; dark hair, dark eyes, slender face — the same characteristics as our parents. I am the odd one: brown hair and hazel eyes.

Our first cousins, Rick and Tim, lived just a few miles from us. We

were all as skinny as rails. Tim and I were the same age, but Tim resembled Wayne. Wayne and Rick were the same age, but I resembled Rick, who had blonde hair and blue eyes. We always joked that our parents had mistakenly switched Tim and I as infants.

We spent many weekends together racing our bicycles, playing basketball behind the barn, chasing lizards, and killing snakes, especially water moccasins. Killing a water moccasin was a challenge, a sign of heroism to us boys. First we would herd the snake from the water so that it could not escape. Then someone would have to be strong enough to drop a big rock onto its head, and then possess (a term that is not available in the dictionary but means “more than bravery”) to nudge the snake with a stick [or foot] to confirm that it was dead.

When Mom and Dad were not watching too closely, the four of us would hike down a trail through the forest and climb down the side of the bluff where Reedy Creek poured off the rocks, creating a fifteen-foot high waterfall. Rock ledges ten-feet high provided a three-second adventure of free-fall through the air, into the water. I shall never forget the roar of the water pounding the rocks below, the surrounding forest and the tiny rainbows shining through the mist, the green wilderness that slowly evolved through the month of October to bright reds, yellows, auburns, and almonds. As the trees shook off their array of colors, the leaves floated downstream, providing rafts for dragonflies.

We called it “The Mouth of Reedy”. Only a handful of people even knew the place existed. So, we thought it ours to name. Our fathers, who were brothers, had spent much of their youth at the Mouth of Reedy. It was the perfect scenery, the perfect family, and the perfect life. No responsibilities except keeping our rooms clean, the grass mowed, our prayers prayed, and our teeth brushed.

Well, maybe I exaggerated. We did have a few more responsibilities: church and homework. I did not like church so much, and I despised school. Wayne and I were baptized at the age of twelve, and we never questioned what we were to do with our Sunday mornings. No arguments; Sunday was church day. Our mother made sure that God was a part of our lives, even if we as little boys detested it.<sup>1</sup>



As far as school is concerned, I repeated my sixth-grade year of elementary school. Most of my classmates were nine months older than I. My parents had convinced me that it would be in my best interests if I repeated the year. Now, I am glad that we made that decision. But at the time, it was a social disaster. Fyffe High School consisted of grades seven through twelve. So when Tim progressed to the seventh grade, he joined Rick and Wayne. I was left alone with a group of fifty-five kids I did not know. I had become “the new kid”. And it was during that year that teenage life began. The giant struggles were then born.

It has been my observation that all teenagers desire Popularity — to be more than just accepted by their fellows. At Fyffe High School, those who were rejected [mainly because they were not athletes, for social status had little to do with it] were known as the “Rebels”. Their enemies were the “Faps”. Anyone who did not fit into one of these two categories either associated with teenagers from other schools [and were mocked for doing so] or were labeled “Lone Wolves”.

Faps were “meat-head” football players with loud mouths. Rarely were their words beneficial to their hearers. Throughout most of the school year, they could always be found in their blue jeans and letterman jackets [red and white with black trim].

The Faps dictated what took place in the social circle of the school. If you were not a Fap, you could not throw a good party, for no one would come except your few companions. A Fap considered any joke to be dull unless another Fap laughed at it. All efforts to run for political office, or anything else that involved your schoolmates’ support, seemed pointless if it did not meet the Faps’ approval. No one liked the Faps, but many pretended to do so in a vain attempt for social acceptance. It was like a dictatorship.

The Rebels were basically the non-athletes. They pointed and laughed at the Faps, but there was still a desire to be popular like a Fap. I really did not like the Faps [though I did like many of the football players — not all football players were Faps, but all Faps were football players]. Faps were bullies who picked on the younger kids and were obnoxious towards anyone who did not play football.

Being accustomed to kids a year older than me had established a more mature spirit within me, and I spent my sixth- and seventh-grade years sulking because I was not with my old classmates. I did not try to establish friendships with the Rebels or the Faps. Rarely would they speak to me, and rarely would I speak to them. I did not fight with them — but I was not a friend to any of them, either.

Our high school included grades seven through twelve. We did not attend a separate middle school or a junior high school — our town was too small. A senior English class could very well be next door to a seventh-grade math class. When my eighth-grade year began, my old classmates [who were now freshmen] began to establish friendships with sophomores and juniors, while I was becoming in their eyes, well, just another eighth grader. Wayne and Rick were seniors, Tim was a freshman, and I can honestly say that after the first week of school, these three guys appeared to be my only friends.

Realizing that Wayne, Rick, and Tim would not always be at my side, and with another four years left in school, I decided to attempt making friends with my classmates. But I had no clue where to begin. Friendships had always occurred naturally. But nature, it appeared this time, was not in my favor. How does one make new friends? Was there a five-step plan? I explained the situation to my dad. He patted me on the shoulder and said to me,

“Son, if people think that you like them, nine times out of ten, they will like you back.”

**“The only way to have a friend is to be one.” — Ralph Waldo Emerson**

If I had pretended to like my classmates when I actually despised them, acting as if I desired their friendship when in reality I could care less, then perhaps I would have been a phony. But I wanted friends; therefore, I sought ways to make friends. And if being friendly to people was the formula for gaining friends, then I was willing to try it.

I put my dad’s words to the test and began reaching out to my classmates. The Lone Wolves warmed up to me rather quickly. Very few, if

any, humans desire isolation. I approached the Rebels and asked each of them those casual questions such as “How are you doing” and “What have you been up to,” receiving casual answers such as “Fine, what about yourself?” And that was basically all. After a few days, conversation came naturally.

During our snack breaks, I would make my way down the hall to the Faps and practice the same routine. I was not sure if I wanted to be friends with the Faps, but I decided that I should give it a try, considering my success with everyone else. I made sure not to force myself into anyone’s conversation, but merely expressed kindness, shook hands, offered them a potato chip or whatever else I had purchased with my fifty cents, conversed when the conversation was fruitful and left when the conversation grew stale. Everyone enjoys a warm smile, but even a friend can overstay a welcome.

One would think that when the Rebels noticed my associating with the Faps, or the Faps with the Rebels, both groups might shun me, and I would find myself back where I began. But that never happened. I think it was because I never acted like a Rebel or a Fap — I just expressed as much generosity as I felt one could and refrained from contributing in back-biting conversations. Of course, there were one or two Faps who looked at me strangely when I spoke to them. One Fap in particular [who acted as if his Ripped Chest could stop bullets] would always look at me suspiciously. After that initial second, he would shake my hand, but then turn his eyes away as if he had performed his duty. I took such expressions as my cue to exit. All in all, I made friends quite easily, and by the end of the year, I had gained and was enjoying friendships with most of my classmates, made a best friend named Ken (whose friendship has lasted to this day), and some of the Faps even invited me camping one Friday night — an event that deserves later discussion.

In addition to my new friends, our basketball team won our third county championship which reestablished relationships with my old friends in the freshman class.

My new friends also helped to build my self-confidence. Many family therapists teach that interaction with others is how one discovers his

or her personal identity. David Johnson writes in his book, **Reaching Out**,

**“From the reflections of others, you develop a clear and accurate picture of yourself. When others view you as a worthwhile, valuable person, you tend to view yourself similarly...It is within your relationships that you discover who you are as a person.”**<sup>2</sup>

I must admit that going out of my way to be friendly seemed awkward in the beginning. Many new things we try seem awkward: tying shoe laces, bicycling, holding a golf club, repelling down a cliff, etc. But after you practice for awhile, it becomes natural. You do not think about which string you should hold first, you do not think about your balance on the bicycle, you do not spend time trying to recall where you should place your hands on the golf club. Once something becomes automatic, you do not have to think.

It has been my experience that when a characteristic is adopted and practiced long enough, it becomes a part of ones everyday character. Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans that perseverance produces character. If we persevere in friendly behavior, it will eventually become a part of our everyday character. We will no longer have to think about behaving in a friendly manner. Instead, we will always act friendly because we are friendly.

## Chapter 3

# *Fame, Power, and Goodwill*

**“As a young person, I swung dizzily between feelings of ‘I am a victim and I’m not as good as anybody else’ to ‘I’m no ones victim and I’m going to be better than anyone else’.” — Beth Moore**

The following year, as a freshman, the Rebels and Faps were harassing the younger schoolboys, holding them upside down and sticking their heads in the toilets [a term known as “swirlies”], knocking books out of their arms and slamming their locker doors shut. I knew how it felt to be mistreated. My older brother and I were not always the best of friends.

So I began to make it a point, at the conclusion of every break, to walk to the other side of the schoolhouse where the underclassmen stayed. I would say hello to the boys, pat them on the back, ask them about their day, etc. And I still remember the astonished looks and stares I received. I recall reaching out my hand to greet one boy, only to notice him keeping his eyes on my other arm as if he was expecting a blow to the head, like a dog keeping its distance, watching my every motion, unsure if I was to be trusted.

Seeing the light in their eyes when they realized I was only expressing kindness, when they smiled upon seeing me throughout the day, when they began to reach out and shake my hand between classes, I felt good about myself. So I decided to make it a rule [if at all possible] to treat everyone in that school the same.

Within eight months, most of my enemies had become my friends and if any of them remained an enemy, it was because they made themselves dislike me. I did not provoke them. The golden rule, *to treat others the way you would like to be treated*, had been preached to me since childhood, but it was then that I understood the rule for the very first time.

By the end of my sophomore year, I had gained so much weight with my fellow schoolmates that I was elected Student Body Vice President. The following year, I made President.

**“A man who has friends must himself be friendly” (Proverbs 19:24).**

Every person desires or has a friend. Since friendliness creates friendships, what keeps us from establishing friendships with each of our acquaintances? Simply this: not expressing enough friendliness.

Now allow me a brief moment to explain the events of the campout with the Faps. These eighth-grade boys knew a few seniors who bought them three or four pints of liquor. There were eight of us, and two got drunk. That night, watching those two boys stumbling, crying one second and laughing the next, one moment fighting and the next moment hugging was entertaining to a fourteen-year-old boy. Never before had I witnessed a drunk. I took a few swigs; foolish as the others, “to prove myself a man”. It tasted like Kool-Aid accompanied by a kick that pinched my nose and rolled my eyes to the back of my head. Those who had the liquor were reluctant to share it, for the seniors had charged them a pretty penny. If one sip of liquor *rung my bell*, I am grateful that our supply was limited.

D., one of the two drunken boys, climbed to the top of a tree, and some of the other boys set its trunk on fire. They used gasoline. Everyone laughed as the fire slowly made its way up the tree. I stood a good distance away and watched in disbelief. My cousins and brother would probably have reacted the same as I. We were known to partake in some outlandish things, but nothing this insane.

After D. leaped from the tree, he joined in as the others beat out the fire with blankets. After the air grew cold, we rode in a car to our host’s house, a mile from the campground, and slept indoors — the driver, B., being the other drunk boy. We never imagined that we would be caught. And we never were. The next morning, as B. and D. hugged the toilet with moans and groans between every thirty-second interval of throwing up, I traveled home with my mother, reflecting on the night’s events.

I had begun to cherish the fantasy of walking through the halls of the schoolhouse and hearing my name yelled by my new friends. That is why I went to the campout, even when I discovered that there would be liquor. I *did* enjoy being friendly, but I had ended up endangering my life so that I might win more Popularity. I have witnessed adults do this as well.

Many boys joined the football team to become Popular. Yes, they gained Popularity, but many of them slowly became Faps — and hated by the Rebels and all the younger boys. The new Faps were not aware that they had become Faps. They were finally Popular, and to them, that is all that mattered.

## **Fame and Power**

Popularity, as we will define it here, is “Fame and Power”. Fame is to be well-known. But a person might be well known as a jerk. Then what does Fame profit? Fame brings Power. And such Power is taken by force; mostly by intimidation.

Now Fame and Power stemming from Goodwill is another subject. Goodwill, it seems to me, is a virtue that results from kind works for no other reason than to be kind. To be known as a kind person is of great value. Many times [especially during high school], Power is gladly given to the Goodwilled person, for everyone feels confident that they will be treated kindly in return. Those with Goodwill never cease to express kindness, for Fame and Power were never their motives.

The Faps’ popularity was not the result of Goodwill. That is why the Rebels despised the Faps. But the Faps did possess Popularity, and to rebel against the Faps, if social acceptance was your goal, was rather ignorant.

People who seek Popularity only for the sake of having Fame and Power are setting themselves up for a meaningless pursuit. All people who live will die. And the dead are soon forgotten.<sup>1</sup> What then is the reward for Popularity?

But if kindness is expressed<sup>2</sup>, and that kindness is rewarded with Popularity, then Fame and Power can be very profitable. These assets can be used to set a great Christian example.

As a teenager, David the Psalmist’s character had been tested as well, and although the time and circumstances were different, the general message is the same: All teenagers are faced with trials and decisions.

Some teenagers choose wisely and are rewarded by the outcomes. Others choose poorly and suffer lifelong consequences.

I know some people who spend their entire lives searching for happiness through popularity, money, possessions, etc. But I find these people still searching for fulfillment, for meaning in life. They claim that happiness is made. But I had much rather say that happiness is found. You might disagree. You might even say, "Well he is not experienced enough to know what he is talking about." And you could be right. But allow me the benefit of the doubt, and by the end of the book perhaps you may draw a different conclusion.



## Chapter 4

# *Goliath*

**“I will save My people Israel from the hand of the Philistines and the hand of all their enemies” (2 Samuel 3:18).**

The boastful jeers from the Philistines echoed through the land. There was a war in the region of Ephes Dammim, Israel — the region meaning, “eruption of blood”.

The armies of Israel had camped forty days in the desert. A month prior, these men had left their homes with their swords sheathed and food provisions draped across their shoulders. They hugged and kissed their wives and children for what might be the final time. Despite their years of combat experience, death to some of them would be unavoidable. The soldiers at Ephes Dammim were desperately searching for a miracle. But what they found [or who they found] was rather unexpected.

**“Now the Philistines gathered their armies together...in Ephes Dammim. And Saul and the men of Israel were gathered together, and they encamped in the Valley of Elah, and drew up in battle array against the Philistines. The Philistines stood on a mountain on one side, and Israel stood on a mountain on the other side, with a valley between them. And a champion went out from the camp of the Philistines, named Goliath...Then he stood and cried to the armies of Israel, and said to them, ‘Why have you come out to line up for battle? Am I not a Philistine, and you the servants of Saul? Choose a man for yourselves and let him come down to me. If he is able to fight with me and kill me, then we will be your servants. But if I prevail against him and kill him, then you shall be our servants and serve us.’ And the Philistine said, ‘I defy the armies of Israel this day; give me a man that we may fight together.’ When Saul and all Israel heard these words of the Philistine, they were dismayed and greatly afraid” (1 Samuel 17:1-4a; 17:8-11).**

In his book, **David, A Man of Passion and Destiny**, Charles Swindoll writes,

**“What Goliath did was suggest a tactic commonly used in the**

**Eastern world, and that is, a representative battle, a one-on-one fight. He would represent the Philistine army and whomever Israel chose would represent the Israelite army. Whoever won, his army won. And whoever lost, his whole army lost.”<sup>1</sup>**

Ancient military training is thought by many to have been nothing more than tactical stick fighting. But this was not the case. Soldiers underwent ultimate physical tests. Since childhood, these men had been skillfully trained in weaponry and hand-to-hand combat. Every life was taken following eye contact. Homosexuality, child molestation and bestiality were commonly practices among many of the pagan armies.<sup>2</sup>

Goliath was an experienced champion. His confidence and the manner in which his Philistine brothers praised him tell enough. From his apparent popularity, this was not Goliath’s first match. He had probably spilt more blood than a butcher. Goliath was the heavy-weight champion of soldiers, the icon of warriors. Any man who can look another man in the eye, take away everything a person ever had and ever will have, laugh in near ecstasy as his victim’s blood paints the dust of the ground, should be wrapped in a straight jacket and placed in a psychiatric ward with padded walls. But of course, he would also be the ideal choice for a one-on-one battle.

Goliath stood 9’9” tall. His chest-armor weighed about 125 pounds. He wore leg and shin coverings made of bronze and carried a bronze spear. The head of the spear alone weighed 25 pounds.<sup>3</sup> The Scriptures record that the entire Israelite army literally shook with fear (1 Samuel 17:11).

There has been a point in all of our lives when we have been “called out”.

You are sitting with some of your friends, and one of them slips you some pornographic material.

You and your girlfriends are eating dinner, and they verbally bash another girl from school. They turn to you and ask your opinion.

Your athletic team has finished practice, and one of the older players hazes a freshman. Will you defend him/her or join in with the group?

Quick decisions. Will you be prepared? I truly believe it is in these little areas of decision that Satan loves Christians to be placed. Paul warned the early Christians,

**“Above all, take the shield of faith with which you will be able to quench the fiery darts of the wicked one” (Ephesians 6:16).**

Paul spoke of “fiery darts”. Why might Satan choose fiery darts as a means of attack?

**“For a righteous man may fall seven times and rise again, but the wicked shall fall by calamity” (Proverbs 24:16).**

King Solomon [in writing Proverbs] understood, just as Satan understands, that a follower of God who has stood his ground for a number of years returns to his or her feet after a fall. But if Satan can make a Christian limp, grow tired of running, of persevering, worn down by exhaustion, pulled to the ground, that Christian might want to quit.

**“It is the image of God reflected in you that enrages hell; it is this at which the demons hurl their mightiest weapons.” — William Gurnall**

The more I experience this evil, the more I have observed that Satan had rather toy with God’s people like a trickster, like that giant, like a bully who takes a child’s hat and waves it just above the child’s reach. Satan waves the hat — he throws the darts. He reminds you of the events from your past that you have tried to forget. He tries to make you feel worthless. He whispers in your ear, “You will never live up to God’s expectations. It is not worth your trouble. Just wish that you could forget you ever heard of Jesus. I can help you.”

I am slow to assume that Israel’s war with Goliath was simply a coincidence. Satan may have desired David to face Goliath. David had been anointed as the next king of Israel just a chapter prior to the battle (1 Samuel 16:12). Satan would have desired to disrupt that plan. God, having predestined David to be the next king of Israel, may have brought David to face Goliath knowing David would conquer, which would not only aid David’s faith and growth, but pave his road to the throne of Israel. And both forces, Good and evil, escorted with their plans and ideals, are still at work today.

Some may believe that David was too young to realize the real dangers of his choice. But David knew exactly what he was doing. It was I who didn't. I was the foolish one. I followed the crowd. David turned his back on the crowd and became a king.

## Chapter 5

# *A New Perspective*

**“‘Who are You?’ said the Caterpillar. Alice replied, rather shyly, ‘I-I hardly know, Sir, just at present — at least I know who I was when I got up this morning, but I must have changed several times since then.’” — Lewis Carroll**

During the summer before my junior year of high school, I was seventeen, and my life revolved around three things: basketball, weight training, and girls. I was preparing myself for next year’s basketball season in hopes of starting on the Varsity.

At the time, I was going through a period many people call “finding yourself”. I was not sure what I valued or where I was headed. Only my past made sense. Soren Kierkegaard once said that life is lived forward but understood backward. I suppose he is right in many degrees.

Fyffe lies among a handful of county schools [most of them the size of Fyffe or smaller] and one city school called “Fort Payne”. In this part of the county, if you are a starting athlete, your opponents know your first and last name, your relatives, even your home address. You might even be related to your opponent in some way.

Throughout my years of playing basketball, I had established relationships with many players from other schools. They introduced me to their friends and their friends to their friends.

I began winning friendships with teenagers throughout the county. And I must admit that it began to develop within me a very confident spirit — perhaps a little conceit. My confidence led me to believe that I could accomplish anything. And that is good. But my self-conceit demanded that I have it. We will not yet discuss the dangers in this. What I wish for you to understand at the time is that, with this sudden entrance into these social circles, I thought that I might not need God after all. I was doing quite well on my own.

I never had a girlfriend in high school. But if I ever needed a date [for a banquet or some other special occasion], one was available — sometimes my dates tried to make themselves a little too available.<sup>1</sup> And a girl offering her body to me only added to my flippancy. I was also invited to drinking parties hosted by teenagers from other schools. Though I continued to turn down sex and invitations to the drinking parties, spiritual matters at this time in my life were almost non-existent. There were only three or four teenagers in the church where I attended, and they were much younger than I.

I felt alone in the battle — this spiritual warfare.

I thought that I was the only one being attacked by so many temptations. And the pain of fighting alone did not seem worth it any longer.

Satan was whispering in my ear,

“Russell, God does not expect you to serve Him whole-heartedly during this time. Just go with the flow. Attend the parties and drink with the boys — you will not have these moments forever. You are only a teenager once. Many people your age are having sex. When the wild days are over, you will have time to make amends with God. He will understand. Besides, God Himself said that no man is without sin.”

I have to admit that I was not enthusiastic about giving up my virginity. Though the urge to have sex was quite strong at the time, and still is, my soul has always treasured sexual purity — I presume it to be the only remnant of physical chastity that I have left undisturbed. I must use the term “physical chastity”, for I am by no means virtuous mentally. Maintaining a pure mind is a battle in which we are all enlisted.

Meeting new people and associating with my buddies were my most anticipated events. I felt that drinking parties were the ideal setting to find this delight. But the drunkards at Fyffe who were my age were Faps turned thieves and drugies. So, I stayed clear of them. I knew that, soon, my close friends would begin their own drinking parties, and I was growing more excited. I was already imagining myself in college with a red cup in my right hand, [filled with an alcoholic beverage], chatting with girls at a fraternity party.

That summer, my grandparents introduced me to Nathan. Nathan was a young minister who had moved into town to preach at their congregation. He was twenty-six years old and fresh from youth ministry. His hair and mustache were black. He stood about six-feet tall, weighed one hundred and ninety pounds. His eyes were squints when he smiled. The first month after meeting Nathan, he asked if I would like to go to "Backwoods Christian Camp" where he had been invited to spend the night and speak at a devotional. I had heard of Christian camps, but I had never been given an opportunity to visit one. I had mostly imagined Christian camps as a retreat for social outcasts who gathered for board games: a place to find acceptance despite their lack of social and athletic skills.

I remember thinking, "Why not go? There are girls there. Besides, it might be fun." I had nothing to lose. I needed to get away from home. I felt a deep hunger in my soul for something of which I could not yet figure out. I thought, "Maybe romance is the answer." Besides, I was sure there would be some good outdoor activities.

That evening, I traveled with Nathan to Lineville, Alabama.

Backwoods Christian Camp was literally in the back-of-the-woods. The camp was located on Wedowee Lake, in southern Alabama, and was the perfect setting for a horror movie: A camp engulfed by the deep forest, the moon mirrored in the lake, the grunting of bullfrogs, wind rustling in the trees, and one telephone that did not work properly. Nathan and I happened to arrive during "free time" when all the campers basically entertained themselves for three hours. Nathan introduced me to his nephew, David. He was seventeen, with short, blonde hair, blue eyes, about five feet ten inches, and one hundred and eighty pounds. He was thick like a stout wrestler. David befriended me and introduced me to the rest of the guys who were all sophomores, juniors, or seniors. I even met a boy from Lineville High School's varsity basketball team. Lineville's team made the State Playoffs every year, and I had gained much respect for them. It was difficult for me to believe that I was meeting one of their players at a Christian camp. We sat and discussed basketball for over an hour.

There were about two hundred teenagers in all. The girls were defi-

nitely something I had anticipated. But none of them turned my head. I was disappointed. Why else had I come? Only two hours had passed, but I was ready to go home. The last place I wanted to be was with a bunch of “happy-go-jolly outcasts”. Granted, the people were nice. And yes, there were a couple of guys who seemed sociable. But where was the adventure? I craved rock climbing, canoeing, hiking, exploring, something exciting and wild. I began to fear that I would find myself in arts and crafts.

That night, things began to change. All the senior-high guys slept in bunk-beds in a cabin that was built to look like a barn. They were all from different places: Florida, Georgia, Alabama, North Carolina, and Tennessee. I stayed upstairs in the loft with David and about fifteen other boys. The loft smelled like that of opening a fresh cabinet door. Our counselors were a couple of college guys who acted as older brothers, helping when they were needed but as permissive as we would be if we were in their position. As we were getting ready for “lights-out”, many of the guys began talking about the girls.

Boy 1: “Sarah looked pretty tonight. I think she’s the best lookin’ girl here.”

Boy 2: “I dated her last year.”

Boy 3: “Are you kidding? Bethany out-does Sarah anytime.”

Boy 2: “What?! Bethany looks like a mannequin with all that make-up caked on!”

I thought sarcastically, “Get a grip. They are all zoo animals.”

Christianity for me, by this time, was “for the old folks and the people who don’t have friends.” And I had become filled with Pride. Pride is the very root of danger. Pride leads one to believe that he or she should be first and foremost in everything. Pride has turned friend against friend, ended marriages, left people standing in rebellion rather than kneeling in submission to God. Pride is what led to Lucifer’s rebellion<sup>2</sup> which many theologians believe to be the beginning of evil. It was Adam and Eve’s Pride that kept them from Eden, and it was Pride that drove Cain to murder Abel. No wonder God hates such Pride — it reminds Him of where it all went wrong. Pride is the first step into a life of “Me, Me, Me”, and



if continually fed, will make one a monster of ultimate misery, hatred, and despair.

*Lord, teach us to remember we are but man.*

I leaned over to David and said,

“What girls? I haven’t seen any good lookin’ ones around here.”

Brandon, a close friend of David’s, overheard my statement. He leaned over and said,

“Oh, that’s right. You haven’t met Ferryn have you?”

I answered, “Nah, who’s that?”

Brandon and David looked at each other and smiled.

David said, “You’ll meet her tomorrow. She’s John Rice’s daughter. You know John, the director of the camp? Ferryn went to a Les Miserables play tonight. She’s fine. And she’s a good girl too. Just wait.”

The lights went out.

“Okay, who’s going?” whispered an unfamiliar voice.

Brandon and David turned on some flashlights and pulled some black shirts and shoes from beneath their bunks.

“Russell,” whispered David. “A few of us are going to hang out with some of the girls at the softball field. You comin’?”

I thought, “The zoo animals? Why?! You want to come back bitten or wounded or something?”

But I grabbed my shoes. Though I knew very well that I had seen all the girls at the camp, I was optimistic and figured that I may have overlooked one or two. Plus, the thought of creeping through the woods at night was appealing.

David tossed me a camouflage shirt.

I followed the guys as they crept out the back door of the cabin. Our counselor sat up in his bunk and said to us, “You get caught and it’s your own fault. I’m asleep.”

We formed a line and walked amidst the shadows of the trees and dodged the porch lights from the surrounding cabins, slowly making our way down a trail in the forest. Not a single guy uttered a word or used a flashlight during the entire hike. The full moon lit our path, and the guys knew the location of every stone, limb, and ditch.

We made our way up a hill to an open area consisting of a softball field and a concrete basketball court. The hill overlooked Lake Wedowee. The water seemed to stretch on forever, bordered by black silhouettes, the full moon hovering above the lake, the warm night, the cool breeze — I felt like I had returned to the Mouth of Reedy.

“So, David. Where are the girls?” I asked sarcastically.

Two girls were waiting. Their boyfriends were in our group of eight. The girls explained that more were suppose to come but grew afraid and backed out. The two couples sat in swings by themselves beside the court. They stayed within our view and did not even so much as kiss. I was a bit surprised at this. I remember thinking how strange they were — “I’d find a place to make out, if I were them.”

Since we were away from the campground and adult supervision, we did not even consider returning to our cabins — any boy would have stayed. We lay down on the concrete court that glowed under the moonlight. The stars decorated the dark, navy blue sky. A boy from Guam, whom everyone called “Guami”, told me about life on the island, how he had heard of Backwoods, how much he loved the camp, but how he longed to see his girlfriend back home. There was another guy nicknamed “Tiger” [because he resembled Tiger Woods] who spoke of past summers at Backwoods and shared stories from his most memorable weeks. All the guys were lying on the court, staring up at the moon, taking turns sharing hilarious recollections of Backwoods, and we laughed all night long. This place did not seem so bad after all.

*"Dong!...Dong!...Dong!"* 7:00 am. The large, black bell stood ten-feet high just outside the cafeteria. Occasionally, a child would grab that rope during the day, and we would all be driven mad by the loud clanking. At 7:00 am, it was quite horrendous.

"Get up!!!!" screamed the counselor. "Yeah! We will see if you little boys sneak out again tonight!"

He seemed rather to enjoy himself.

Moans and groans echoed throughout the cabin. The boys who had not sneaked out the night before had already taken showers. David rolled out of his bed, slipped on his shoes, wrapped a blanket around himself and headed down the stairs.

"Don't bother getting ready right now," David said. "We're having a five-minute devotional with the rest of the camp at the sand box, say a prayer for the breakfast, and then come back and take showers. We never eat first. We always eat last. Only those whose cabins are clean get to eat first."

I looked around the barn and laughed. I could see why.

I slipped on a shirt and put on a pair of sweat pants and headed down to the sand box — the beach volleyball area. I caught up with David during the morning devotional and inquired about Ferryn. He pointed to a girl dressed in a white t-shirt and gray sweat pants. She was about five-foot seven inches and one-hundred and ten pounds with long, brown hair, blue eyes, clear skin, and she was amazingly attractive. She sat on a park bench with some of her girlfriends, with a bottle of water in her hand.

When the devotional concluded, I grabbed David by the arm and made him walk over to Ferryn with me. I suppose David thought he was to introduce me, but I reached out my hand and introduced myself.

"Hey, I'm Russell."

She looked up, grabbed my hand and replied, "Hey, George!"

I said, "Who?"

"Oh, I thought you were George Houston. Are you his brother?"

"Nope."

Ferryn looked surprised and said, "You look just like him."

I replied, "Never met him."

Though it may appear that I abounded in self-confidence, speaking to her, I was nervous. For me to meet a beautiful girl who loved God was not an everyday experience. One stereotype in dating follows that the boy urges the girl towards sex but the girl sets the limits. But the situations were reversed for me, as it is for many guys. I immediately, without giving it a seconds thought, placed Ferryn on a pedestal.

Ferryn and I chatted for a few moments before her cabin was called to breakfast. I later apologized to David for dragging him over to Ferryn only to have him act as a spectator. His hair was sticking out everywhere, and he still had not fully awakened.

That morning, we had a group Bible study with the guys from our cabin. I had only experienced co-ed Bible studies, where the teacher talked endlessly. And those few people who actually paid attention rarely spoke up. But here, the lessons were just for us guys. I am sure you can imagine the things we discussed. There were moments when I thought, "Wait. Can we discuss that here?" And the counselor leading the study took examples from the Bible and related them to our everyday experiences. Stories written thousands of years ago were related to my present circumstances. Many of the guys contributed their own thoughts, but I kept silent. I was the new kid. I just watched and listened. I actually enjoyed the lesson and even remained afterwards to ask our teacher a few questions.

Teenagers have a desire to have their questions answered. But fear of humiliation results in silence. This is often due to the presence of the opposite sex, fear that others will think less of them, that the mentor will not keep the conversation in confidence, or the result of a religious norm, "Hey, this is church. You can't say that."

The teenagers sang at the top of their lungs during the devotionals. They did not sing any of the traditional songs that I was raised hearing in our congregation: songs consisting of seventeenth-century words whose definitions were as foreign to me as seventeenth-century history. We sang

songs composed of words that I used casually, rather than “thou” and “pinion” and “prostrate”. I thought “prostrate” was a bodily organ. I rarely sang in church back home. There at camp, I began to sing a little, but I kept my voice low.

As I watched my new friends sing, though some sounded great and some not so great, I could tell that they were “lost” in worship. They stood with their eyes closed, heads bowed, and the only way some of them could be distracted from their worship was with a nudge or a pinch. I had never seen this before. Now, I *had* seen it on television. I thought they were a little strange. I could tell that there was something different about these people. But I was still skeptical.

I asked myself, “Is this for real? Do these teenagers really, truly, deeply desire to live right and serve God, or is this just a show?”

In my mind, most people were fake and selfish. Remember, I had only seen teenagers as little humans striving to climb the social ladder — lying and breaking friendships — whatever it took to climb to the next step.

Later that afternoon, after the singing and Bible discussions, I heard that Nathan was searching for me. It was time to return home. Surprisingly, I was disappointed. I did not want to leave. I did not want to miss another speaker, another song, or another devotional. All the senior guys from the cabin urged me to return for the seventh session — the last week of camp. And as Nathan and I left, I did not shake a single hand.

I departed with hugs.

I went to Backwoods Christian Camp with the idea that I was the only teenager who struggled with temptation. But as I listened to the conversations, observed their way of living — their joy, their striving to live as Christ — I knew I was wrong. I had believed a lie because I did not know a truth: that all teenagers are tempted to sin, just like me. And by observing their lives, I realized that there was much more to Christianity than what I was living. Amidst the hundreds of Christian teenagers, a spiritual battle arose within me, a deep stirring that I had never felt before. Something was tugging me. Someone was knocking on the door.

What Something? What door?

I could not tell you, because I did not know.

But I knew that I was afraid. Afraid of what?

I was afraid of what might happen if I did open that door.

## Chapter 6

# *Scripts*

**“Now David was the son of that Ephrathite of Bethlehem Judah whose name was Jesse, and who had eight sons. And the man was old, advanced in years, in the days of Saul. David was the youngest. And the three oldest followed Saul. But David occasionally went and returned from Saul to feed his father’s sheep at Bethlehem. Then Jesse said to his son David, ‘...carry these ten cheeses to the captain of their thousand, and see how your brothers fare and bring back news of them.’ So David rose early in the morning, left the sheep with a keeper, and took the things and went as Jesse had commanded him. And he came to the camp as the army was going out to the fight and shouting for the battle. And David left his supplies in the hand of the supply keeper, ran to the army, and came and greeted his brothers” (1 Samuel 17:12,14,15,18,20,22).**

Someone once said to me that the greatest temptations occur during the teen years. But I had much rather say that the imprints left from those temptations are the greatest during the teen years. The teenage years are times when people discover their identity; who they are, for what they stand, what they want to do in life. You are surrounded by people of the same age who have been raised in different environments and embrace different values. Through interaction with other people, you discover your own ideas and values. All of us change our views throughout our lifetime, for our experiences shape and mold our outlook.

Since your birth, your “Script” has shaped your life. Scripts include teachings from others, learned and observed behaviors, ways of dealing with stress and crisis, etc. And your Script directs your outlook on the world. Imagine a man who possesses a very skeptical attitude but reacts with generosity towards the homeless because he recalls, as a lad, witnessing his father cheerfully give money to the needy. But let us say that a different man who is very giving refuses to help the homeless because he recalls, as a lad, his father handing money to a cripple, only to later discover “the cripple” walking around with a new bottle of whiskey.

The writings on our Script influence our behavior, but those writings are susceptible to change throughout our life. And the most influential time of Script-alterations occurs during the teenage years. You begin to break away from the sheltering wing of your parents [or guardians], and additional writings begin to appear on your Script; sometimes better, sometimes worse. You experience something new, and that new something influences you. Not that these things are new to everyone, for everything has been done or said before.<sup>2</sup>

Then you ask,

“Why didn’t my parents ever tell me about this?” or “Does my family really know what they are talking about?”

Such experiences can result in bewilderment and questioning whether or not your parents, or the world around you, has told you the truth. When you attempt to figure things out on your own, you enter the stage many refer to as “finding yourself”.

You may say things such as,

“My family hasn’t a clue about what goes on today at school. They still live in the past” or “My parents are clueless about the things I am experiencing.”

I will not say that your parents do know everything. I do not believe they do. But they have lived longer and encountered more of life’s hurdles than you, including surviving their own teenage years. It is your experiences and their teachings that have been written on your Script. I have met many teenagers who share a stubborn attitude of “Let me be, I can figure life out alone.” But any person, no matter their age, who desires to live without a mentor is preparing themselves for a lifetime of hardship and disappointment. No matter how rebellious you may be, you will either find a mentor or a mentor will find you — whether that teacher is of God or of the devil.

Satan is aware of our Script. And Satan knows all too well the ways in which people are influenced. Do not be deceived into thinking that he does not know that teenagers are attempting to “find themselves”. When



we are unsure of who we are, or what we believe, we are inclined to search for others with whom we can identify, usually through admiration: musicians, writers, actors, athletes, heroes of the Bible, heroes in history, etc. And Satan has been waiting for this moment. Our door to the world opens, and Satan stands there waving a “Free Tour” sign. Satan is a professional, with thousands of years of experience, and he knows how and when to invite himself into our lives. That is why Peter warned,

**“Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour” (1 Peter 5:8).**

## Culture

Our surroundings influence us tremendously. It is our culture that decides what language we speak. Our culture also plays a significant part in how we act and react to certain situations, our choice of words, our traditions, and even our accents. Is that so hard to believe? A man moves from one part of the world to another and his accent and style of clothes change.

Today we have access to gateways that can lead to whatever our senses desire. And that is dangerous. These gateways are mining camps for Satan. Make no mistake; Satan probably delights in the cartoon that society portrays of him. The one dressed in red with horns and a spaded tail, who stands on a street corner, is a great costume for him. Many people look for this red devil. Satan does not appear in that form. Many times we only discover where he has been. It is not until he has left that we realize he was ever present. Satan resides in the unexpected. Satan may come in the form of an advertisement, a church member, a theologian, an attractive person in scandalous clothing, a family crisis, a cinema, a comment in a show, and lyrics in a song.

**“...For Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light” (2 Corinthians 11:14).**

If our Script is more prone to being influenced during our teen years, then Satan will discover teenagers’ interests and make that his most prominent hideout. Marketers know all too well what Satan has known for years; teenagers delight in entertainment and relationships.

“Hey, Wade. You want to go to a movie Saturday night?”

“Susanna! Turn up the music! We can’t hear it!”

“Blair! Chase! What are we doing tomorrow?”

Entertainment and relationships are like an adventure park. Think of the innumerable cinemas, shows, and articles that explain how to get that girl or win that boy, all about how to seduce him or make her moan, all about how to make him want you or how to make her friends want you, too. Marketers make a fortune by using sex and romance, because they know it is of great interest to people of all ages, but much more to teenagers who are trying to adjust to the entry of Puberty and its luggage of hormones.

Please do not misunderstand me. There are many movies, shows, and songs that are great for leisure and a wonderful get-away from the hustle and bustle of the world. And relationships are a key part in developing and maintaining a healthy life, no matter your age. Maintaining a holy life does not mean boycotting relationships or entertainment. Maintaining a holy life is glorifying God with our actions. And that may call for some level of censorship.

Stephen Covey writes in his book, **The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People**.

**“I’m grateful for television and for the many high quality education and entertainment programs. They enrich our lives and contribute meaningfully to our purposes and goals. But there are many programs that simply waste our time and minds and many that influence us in negative ways if we let them. Like the body, television is a good servant but a poor master.”<sup>3</sup>**

God warned the early Christians with such writings as...

**“And do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God” (Romans 12:2).**

**“...do not be deceived...” (Luke 21:8)**

**“...do not be deceived...” (2 Corinthians 6:9)**

**“...do not be deceived...” (2 Corinthians 15:33)**

**“...do not be deceived...” (Galatians 6:7)**

**“Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy — meditate on these things.” (Philippians 4:8)**

We need to make some changes in our life if we are going to keep ourselves unspotted from the world. Begin today by finding the things in your environment contaminating your mind, and censor them. Is it not time you started walking closer to Christ? Will you not allow God to make you into the kind of leader He has in mind? Dig into His word — then ask Him for wisdom and direction. Get away from the pessimism. Ignore the put-downs people hurl at you. Find only encouragement in what your eyes see and your ears hear.

That is what David did, you know. David had the strength and the God-given ability to take down Goliath. Though being sent to take cheese to the Israelites proves that David's father still considered him to be a child, David did not allow that to discourage his confidence in how God could use him. He believed that with God's help, he could accomplish anything.

David was still a teenager with many experiences ahead of him. His Script was wide open. There were many things David did not know, and there are plenty of instances recorded in the Bible where he made mistakes. He did not always ride the white horse.

No one is perfect; Jesus was that for us.

Whatever yesterday held, it is the present that matters to God. God does not care about your past mistakes. He sees you today and who He can mold you into tomorrow. Remember David.

It is not because of who you are or what you have done. It is what God has done for you and what He can accomplish through you.

## Chapter 7

# *A Light in the Camp*

**“But if this is the water you are truly thirsty for then why do you remain thirsty after you’ve had a drink? It’s the wrong well.” — John Eldredge**

“Tim, where are you going?” I asked.

“Shhhh.” Tim motioned me over and whispered, “I’m going to see what Dad is doing.”

Three weeks had passed since my visit to Backwoods. I would be returning for the seventh session in a matter of days.

Tim and I were camping with some of our basketball teammates, and our tents stood across an old harvested cornfield behind Tim’s house. Everyone was drunk but Tim and me. Tim had left the group to go for a walk in the middle of the night. I knew that something was troubling him, so I caught up with him at the edge of the cornfield. My uncle Johnny was burning a pile of tree limbs in their backyard, about two hundred yards away.

Tim and I snuck through the scattered cornstalk stubs until we were a rock’s throwing distance of the fire. Uncle Johnny never knew we were near. Tim and I had been as quiet as mice until Tim interrupted the silence.

“Here...Let’s sit here for a minute. It’s too late at night for dad to be burnin’ tree limbs. He might go out there and find the beer. Let’s watch and see what he does.”

The crackling embers and the chirping crickets drowned our words as we stared at the fire. My brother Wayne and I had grown up just a few miles away. When we were younger, on nights such as these, the four of us played hide-and-seek and caught lightening bugs that floated in the

summer sky. Now, with Rick and Wayne off at college, here Tim and I were, still together...sitting near a brushfire in a cornfield.

"One thing I've learned man," Tim said, "girls ain't worth it."

I laughed and said, "What do you mean?"

"Ahh, just letting the girls come between the guys...you know?" Tim replied.

Tim was dating a girl who happened to be a year older. And at our age, one year made quite a difference.

Tim continued, "I can't believe I've focused so much on her. She ain't worth it. We'll always have our friends and family. One day we'll get married, but not any time soon, right?"

I nodded my head in agreement and said, "So you gonna break up with her?"

Tim replied, "I don't know. But you see, you're here sitting with me, and she's off doing God knows what."

I said, "Tim, when you, me, Wayne, and Rick join up at college, we're gonna have some great times: women, basketball, parties, and all kinds of stuff. It's going to be wild."

Tim laughed and said, "Oh yeah. College is going to be a blast: especially the women. But when we get there, promise me, man, we'll never let a girl come between us."

I replied, "We won't. I promise."

We sat in the middle of that cornfield and talked for at least two hours. I think he and I both knew that when high school ended, we might slowly drift apart. But we were vowing that night to keep the four of us together no matter what lay ahead.

As we sat there, my thoughts began to wander. Tim and I were growing older. The days of hide-and-seek were over. And before long, high school would be finished. What would tomorrow hold? I remember looking at Tim as he laughed, as the light from the fire lit his face. I thought to myself, "We will never have this moment again. Here in this

cornfield, talking together; this will never happen again. Savor it, Russell. Come tomorrow, tonight will be yesterday.”

I could not help but let my mind drift to my friends at Backwoods. I was looking forward to returning; the life-lessons that I might learn and the values that I could bring home. I knew that I lacked integrity [to live as Christ day in and day out], and I craved the strength that He would add to my life.

## **Back to Backwoods**

A few days after the campout, Nathan took Jason [a sixteen-year-old who attended church with us] and me to Backwoods for the seventh session. Jason was an intramural soccer player who would like to have been built like a basketball player but looked more like a football player. He was about 5-feet, 8-inches tall, with a thick build, long face with chubby cheeks, short brown hair, and hazel eyes, who loved to wear his hat backwards. As soon as I stepped out of the car,

“Russell!”

Tiger shouted my name, came running and almost tackled me. I was pleased by his excitement to see me. I felt like a child who had walked into a his very own surprise birthday party. A girl followed behind him and grabbed his left hand while I was shaking his right. It was the first day of camp, and Tiger had already found his girlfriend for the week. I laughed at him and whispered in his ear,

“Look at the Tiger. Already scouting out the women, uh?”

Tiger, with his hat on backwards, shook his head and giggled saying,

“Russ, Ferryn’s here. And she’s single, man. Ain’t no guy wit ’er.”

I laughed and said, “Thanks for the info, Tiger.”

Jason and I took our stuff to the barn where Brandon had saved a bed for me — the only bed left in the loft. Jason had to sleep downstairs with the other latecomers. It was sort of a privilege to sleep in the loft. I really do not know why. Was it because it was easier to sneak out? Was it because the guys who had grown up at Backwoods slept there? Who knows? David, Brandon, and Tiger were sleeping beside me. Guami

never returned to Backwoods. I saw him a year later in a bookstore. I have not seen him since.

About two hundred campers were staying for the week. And every-day we followed a routine: morning devotional, breakfast, clean-up time (the senior guys cleaned the mess hall), cabin Bible study, a snack break, co-ed singing and open Bible discussion, lunch, second clean-up, three hours of free time (swimming in the lake, canoeing, basketball, softball, horse-back riding, or flag football), showers, supper, evening worship, the designated night activity, and then lights-out. I enjoyed every minute of the week. The directors of the camp made the Bible studies so interesting that I was actually disappointed when the sessions ended. I never noticed a single senior guy daydreaming. We were led in discussions pertaining to sex, girls, dating, drinking, drugs, conflicts with parents; all the things that teenagers confront were covered. Our times of sharing experiences and observations really brought us together.

During free time, I headed up to the concrete court for basketball. These games did not involve cursing the ball or the basket's rim for being stupid. Back home cursing seemed to be part of the game. At night while we all lay in our cabins, sometimes the other basketball players and I would stay up until two or three in the morning sharing our experiences as Christians in high school. Basketball by then was rarely mentioned. I was being encouraged to live as Christ every second. And peer pressure to live as a Christian was a unique situation for me.

The second day of camp, I met George. We both sat down on a park bench by the volleyball net and began chatting. I looked up and there was Ferryn. My gut curled at seeing her. She was walking towards us, swinging a water bottle in her right hand. Her hair was pulled back in a pony tail. She was dressed in gray sweatpants and a white t-shirt. She had a little hop in her step. She said,

"Hey Russell! I see you've met George. Do you remember me calling you 'George' during the fourth session? I said you looked a lot like him."

"Oh yeah" I replied, trying my best to drown the loud thumping in my chest.

Concerning George, I could not see the resemblance — but everyone else did. Throughout the week, I wished I had a nickel for every time someone mixed us up. George and I had a good time with this. I would introduce myself as “George” and when the same people spoke with me later, I convinced them that my name was Russell. And I had my driver’s license to prove it. George would be standing nearby and I would say,

“That is George over there.”

George played along. By the end of the week, we had people asking,

“Now which one is which?”

Our times were all good fun. And it seemed as if every teenager there was where I wanted to be — strong spiritually, emotionally, and most of all, faithful to Christ. Backwoods was like a different world.

I believe it was the third night of camp that left its greatest impression. I was making my way back to the cabin after the night devotional and there were two senior guys trailing behind me, re-singing the hymns from earlier. I would never have let any of my friends catch me singing church songs. But these guys loved it; singing from free will, with joy in their hearts. It is often the little things that leave the greatest impressions.

Late that night, a good two hours after lights out, I was suddenly awakened. I turned onto my stomach with my face in the opposite direction of the whispers. Shadows danced on the cabin wall. I slowly turned my head towards the voices, brushing my face against my pillow, cautious to make sure my presence was left unnoticed. A small lantern lit a few faces in the middle of the loft. Some of the guys were gathered around the light with John Rice.

John carries a peaceful vibe about him. Every child in that camp loved him, every counselor respected him, and every teenager was drawn to him. His father had built the camp some years ago on his own property, the land being worth a great sum of money. John was overseeing it now, and he would never think of selling it.

John said, “Guys, I am sorry that I haven’t spent much time with you. I always try to make time to visit the senior guys to chat. But we will have to keep our voices down. Some of the others are still asleep.”



I will never forget that night. The guys just opened their hearts. Deep thoughts and personal feelings are often shared during the late night hours. I do not know why. Even today, my most enjoyable conversations tend to be an hour or so before midnight over warm drinks with close friends.

I listened to their discussions of the trials and obstacles that they were facing at school and home. Some had parents who were divorced, others had fathers or mothers who were alcoholics, some had friends who were sexually abused, and others had friends who had died. I began to realize how blessed my life was. It is amazing how I often feel my life is dreary until I am reminded that there are worse things to experience. My concerns in life were striving to grow stronger for basketball, how to break the news to Mom and Dad when I failed an exam, creating a clever way to ask out a girl. And here were guys my age who were clueless about what they might face when they returned home. The guys discussed how their friends were not Christians, and how the hardships in living as a Christian seemed too difficult to bear.

By this time, something had begun to twist inside me. And for the first time in years, my heart screamed. I wanted to jump into those discussions, but I didn't. I held my tongue — just lay still and listened. I had only known some of these guys for a few days, but I sensed the unity in that room. I knew no matter what was said, the stories would never leave the group. There was no haughtiness among the ones who gave encouragement. No one rode a high-horse. They spoke as brothers. They *were* brothers.

Throughout my short life, I had learned the basics of what to say and how to act in rejecting temptation, though I had not always put my knowledge into action. I could say, "I don't smoke, I don't chew, and I don't date girls that do." I tried to keep myself from sinning, though stumbling here and there as all Christians do. I minded my own business and helped others when help was needed. But I never sought a closer relationship with Christ or tried to better myself as a Christian. I did not mind if I missed church services. Rarely did I crack open the Bible and I had never shared the story of Jesus Christ with anyone. I just wanted to be a "good

ol' country boy". But through the Bible studies and discussions, I was beginning to discover that those were *my* standards — not God's.

I knew that I would soon return to school and continue basketball training, but that thought had suddenly become a small concern. I could feel my heart being tugged by Something, but I was still unsure of what that Something was. From that night forward, I decided to make the most of camp — participate in everything to the max and see if I could somehow win the virtues shared amongst these teenagers — joy, contentment, a sincere concern for the well-being of all people, and a passion for God.

**"By this they will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35).**

The people that I met at Backwoods did not have to call themselves Christians. Anyone who met them would know. And that is how I wanted to be. I did not want an acquaintance, especially a friend, to ask if I was a Christian. I supposed that would be a great insult. If one of my friends has to ask me if I am a Christian then apparently I am not living the life that I should. I wanted my friends to see Jesus living in me. I wanted to give Backwoods to my friends back home. And whether time, dedication, or faithfulness was required; whether the things I learned were sobering, fruitful, or painful, I was willing to face the challenges as long as, in the end, Christ would be found dwelling in me.

**"Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and God will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Lament and mourn and weep! Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up" (James 4:7-10).**

## Filling the Emptiness

One of my favorite movies, "Tombstone" tells the story of western hero Wyatt Earp and his friends who do battle against a group of murderers and thieves called "The Cowboys". There is a scene in the movie that I would like to share with you. Wyatt Earp, Doc Holliday, and their companions attempt to hunt down the cowboys to avenge the death of Wyatt's

brother, Morgan. As the Earp gang rests at a ranch, the ruthless, merciless leader of the cowboys, Johnny Ringo, sends word to Wyatt challenging him to a showdown with pistols. The scene changes to Doc Holliday lying in a bedroom, sick with tuberculosis, as Wyatt stares out of the bedroom window towards the sunset.

Wyatt says with desperation in his voice,

**“What makes a man like Ringo, Doc, makes him do the things he does?”**

Doc Holliday thinks for a moment and replies,

**“A man like Ringo got a great empty hole right through the middle of ’im. He can never kill enough or steal enough or inflict enough pain to ever fill it.”**

I had heard of elders in churches who contributed thousands of their own dollars to church work efforts. I had watched both high school and college students spend time together in prayer. I had witnessed teenagers spend their spring breaks on mission trips. These people were happy; I was not convinced by their words, but by their actions. Anyone can talk. But not everyone can walk what they talk. Great people, I suppose, do not have to talk — they walk the walk, and that says enough.

There in that cabin, when the conversations ended, I thought of how I had lived my life. I realized that of all the social functions I attended, of all the baskets I had scored, the number of dates I had with girls, or my scale of popularity; none of it had filled this hole inside me. Yes, I will say that those pleasures were great at the time. But the next day, all the fun was over. And unless I kept myself busy and entertained, the feeling of emptiness continued to rule my heart. I had thought that I was a grand person because I was to be the Vice President of the student body in the upcoming school year, that I was the starting point guard on the junior varsity basketball team. But as I lay in the loft after overhearing the conversations of those senior guys, I realized that if I died that night, all my accomplishments would be vanity. Eternity would have nothing to do with those things. All that would matter was my relationship with my Creator.

Please do not misunderstand what I am saying. I love spending time with friends. We should make time to relax and enjoy recreation. We

should set goals in life. But it has been my observation that when people remove God to make more room for themselves, placing their entire focus on friendships, recreation, or reaching their goals, they are left with emptiness and loss. And if emptiness remains after reaching temporary goals, imagine one's heart if he or she fails in reaching even those temporary goals. The person will feel cheated in life. And their second emotional state is worse than their first.

**“Unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who build it. Unless the Lord guards the city, the watchman stays awake in vain. It is vain for you to rise up early, to sit up late, to eat the bread of sorrows, for so He gives His beloved sleep” (Psalm 127:1).**

I do not remember exactly when the light from the match struck in the darkness. But sometime during one of the sermons, it all just clicked in my mind. I had not been searching for myself. Rather, I had been searching for a relationship that I never realized existed. Adam and Eve were created to have a personal relationship with God; that relationship was the beginning of mankind's entire existence. And if we as people today do not have a relationship with God, then we will feel as if we are missing something. We should feel empty. We should feel depressed. We should feel lost. We are missing that which we were meant to have from the beginning — a personal relationship with our Creator.<sup>2</sup> Charles Swindoll pointed out that nothing external will satisfy that deep longing in our souls. “The soul belongs to God. Only He can satisfy us in that realm.”<sup>3</sup>

**“Hell and Destruction are never full; so the eyes of the man are never satisfied” (Proverbs 27:20).**

I realized that I was not so great a chap after all. If my heart were as big as my head, I would have owned the spirit of David. I was a small part of a big world that was created thousands of years ago, and at seventeen-years old, I dared to believe I had it figured out.

**“Now prepare yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer Me. Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell Me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements? Surely you know!...Have the gates of death been revealed to you? Or have you seen the doors of the shadow of death? Have you comprehended the breadth of the earth? Tell Me, if you know all this” (Job 38:3-5a;16-18).**

## Home

The last night of camp, after the last worship service, when people responded to the invitation song, it was the tradition at Backwoods for the teenagers to write their requests on paper for the counselors to read — whether the teens requested prayers, forgiveness, a fresh start with Christ, or to become a Christian. The notes would be read, and those gathered would pray. And if someone desired baptism, we headed down to the lake after dismissal. The last evening of camp, I read Luke 6:46:

**“But why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and not do the things which I say?” (Luke 6:46).**

If a spear can be driven into the soul and twisted, I felt it that night. I realized that all my life I had considered myself a dedicated Christian, when in reality, I was merely a church attendant; a tailor’s dummy sitting on a pew, mimicking the words to the songs, ignoring the speaker’s message, day-dreaming during the prayers, and treating the Bible as a coaster on the coffee table. Christianity had not been my faith. Christianity had been my religion. Throughout that week I had been reminded of how far I was from the meaning of life. I had taken my eyes off of Christ and had planted them on the cares of high school — a time that would be over within two years. I truly felt that I had killed Christ; I had planted those spikes into His wrists. I imagined myself kneeling before Him, my head bowed to the ground, unworthy to even lift my hands to the hem of His garment.<sup>4</sup> I felt too small, too sinful to be in the midst of God’s people — too low to pray.

After the lesson that night, I went forward and re-dedicated my life to Christ. I wrote a note and handed it to John Rice for him to read aloud. And for every word he read, it seemed as if a backpack filled with bricks was lifted from my shoulders. When John’s reading reached the climax of my note where I confessed that I had not lived as a Christian should, and I wanted to become the man God would have me to be — I broke down. It seemed as if my soul was like a bow that had been slowly bending throughout the years, cracking during the course of the week and finally snapping. Tears flooded down my face and my heart felt like it had burst, spewing water through my body, cleansing a filth I didn’t realize existed.

God did not humble me to make Himself like a headmaster whose pleasure is to intimidate or frighten school children. I think that C.S. Lewis described God well when he wrote,

**“...He wants you to know Him: wants to give you Himself. And He and you are two things of such a kind that if you really get into any kind of touch with Him you will, in fact, be humble — delightedly humble, feeling the infinite relief of having for once got rid of all the silly nonsense about your own dignity which has made you restless and unhappy all your life.”<sup>5</sup>**

You may read this account and scoff. You may say, “What a nut case” or “He was brainwashed.” I would not blame you. I have thought the same of many Christians.

**“But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him...” (1 Corinthians 2:14a).**

I will not claim, nor do I believe, that one must somehow live my experiences in order to “see” Christianity. To claim such would be absurd. But what matters to me, as I am writing this book, what I consider my most treasured possession, is that I have been told about this man named Jesus. Obeying His commandments feels like stepping into a warm shower after walking through the snow flurries of late December. And one cannot understand cold until he or she understands warmth.

I returned home and shared with Tim the things that I was taught, the people I had met, the basketball players from Lineville, and I told him about Ferryn.

Tim smiled and said,

“The ladies would have been worth the trip.”

“Yeah, your right,” I replied. “That’s the reason I went to Backwoods: To find a girl. But I came back with Something else. And Timbo, I just can’t explain it. All I know is for the first time in years, I feel alive. And it feels good.”

**“and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:7).**

## Chapter 8

# *A Friend from an Enemy*

“So the men of Israel said, ‘Have you seen this man who has come up? Surely he has come to defy Israel; and it shall be that the man who kills him, the king will enrich with great riches, will give him his daughter, and give his father’s house exemption from taxes in Israel.’ Then David spoke to the men who stood by him, saying, ‘What shall be done for the man who kills this Philistine and takes away the reproach from Israel? For who is this uncircumcised Philistine, that he should defy the armies of the living God?’ Now Eliab his oldest brother heard when he spoke to the men; and Eliab’s anger was aroused against David, and he said, ‘Why have you come down here? And with whom have you left those few sheep in the wilderness? I know your pride and the insolence of you heart, for you have come down to see the battle.’ And David said, ‘What have I done now? Isn’t there a cause?’ Now when the words which David spoke were heard, they reported them to Saul; and he sent for him. Then David said to Saul, ‘Let no man’s heart fail because of him; your servant will go and fight with this Philistine.’ And Saul said to David, ‘You are not able to go against this Philistine to fight with him; for you are a youth, and he a man of war from his youth.’” (1 Samuel 17:25-26;28-29;31-33)

Brad tapped me on the shoulder, and we had our talk about the bully in his life.

During some point in our conversation, I shared with Brad a personal experience of my own. I recalled a time when I was 14, a classmate whom I will name “Eric” would (for no wrong doings on my part — at least to my knowledge) punch me on the arm every time we crossed paths in the hall. Eric and I barely knew one another. This was not an act of friendly play. I had brawled with Wayne, Rick and Tim my entire life. I was not afraid of them. But I was terrified of Eric. He was a foot taller and twice my body weight. I was faced with two options.

- 1) I could either bust his nose and then wait for a severe beating.
- 2) I could think of something smarter.

I recalled my Sunday school teacher reading a verse (provided above) that taught that enemies can be defeated with kindness. I figured that I should give it a try. The next time I saw Eric approaching me, I looked up at him and said,

“Hey Eric! How’s it goin’ man?”

Eric paused, tilted his head, like a dog confused by a strange voice, looked at me and answered, “Fine, Russell”.

He then patted me on the shoulder, and he never hit me again.

When people hurl insults or bully you, it is normal to become angry. Anger is an emotion that God granted mankind. But just because we are angry does not give us the right to act out violently. We are in total control of how we respond to any situation. Resorting to a positive attitude instead of a witty comeback, making decisions derived from wisdom rather than sporadic emotional outbursts, and choosing peace rather than revenge are not easy methods to practice — but they are the wisest methods.

**“The best soldier is not warlike. The best fighter shows no anger.”**  
— Tao Te Ching, 3rd Century BC

**“A quick-tempered man acts foolishly, and a man of wicked intentions is hated” (Proverbs 14:17).**

**“He who is slow to wrath has great understanding, but he who is impulsive exalts folly” (Proverbs 14:29).**

**“Be angry, and do not sin. Meditate within your heart on your bed, and be still. Offer the sacrifices of righteousness, and put your trust in the Lord” (Psalm 4:4,5).**

## Behind the Words

It has been my experience that most people speak evil against their neighbor because they are either jealous, envious, or were offended at something the neighbor said or did. The point is that, if someone speaks evil of you, they have done so for a reason. If their statements are a result of jealousy or envy, there is little that you can do. But if they are offended at something that you said or did, there is still hope for peace. And



there is only one way to find out why that person has spoken evil of you — face the accuser. Too often we are tempted to go to our friends or allies to find out why “so and so” said or did “such and such”. Such a practice is dangerous, for people usually relay their interpretation of the message rather than the message itself.

“She said ‘this’ about you.” Yes. She may have. But you were not there to hear her tone, and you were not there to find out why she said it. So go to her and ask.

“He called you a ‘fill in the blank’.” Yes. He may have. He may not have. Find out. Ask. Take the person aside, alone, and speak gently to him.

Remember,

**“A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger” (Proverbs 15:1).**

**“Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all sins” (Proverbs 10:12).**

You may receive an ear-full of ridicule, but try returning gentle words. The person you confront may deny everything. Do not accuse them of lying because they *may* be speaking the truth. And if miscommunication seems to be the case, work out the problem, shake hands or exchange hugs, and leave it alone. Many people in this world feel that if you do not make time for them, they will not make time for you. Therefore, by taking time to approach the person, you express concern for them. You are saying to them through your actions, “I value you as a person, and I do not want an enemy.” They may even rebuke themselves for speaking against you once they discover who you truly are, one who is calm, honest, friendly, and cares about maintaining peace. By loving them, you glorify Christ and you too may make a friend from an enemy. And I suppose no one can have too many friends.

## David’s Counselors

When David conversed with his older brother Eliab, did you notice the manner in which Eliab spoke to him?

“Why have you come down here? And who is taking care of those

few sheep that Dad left in your charge. You're just here to blab your mouth. And you command us? You're a conceited little goat-herder. Run along with your sling shot and bring us that cheese you left behind."

While reading of David, I have noticed that Eliab was not the only brother at the battle. David's other two brothers, Abinadab and Shammah, were also in Saul's military<sup>1</sup> and standing beside Eliab. Remember, "David left his supplies in the hand of the supply keeper, ran to the army and greeted his brothers."<sup>2</sup> David was conversing with a group of men and Eliab overheard him. I believe these men also included Abinadab and Shammah. Besides, what brothers would not remain close together before and during a battle?

I have often wondered why Abinadab and Shammah did not take up for David when Eliab mocked him. Did they feel it was none of their business? Doubtful. In my family, one brother concerns all brothers. Then why did David's brothers remain silent? Not even "Eliab, take it easy" or "Eliab, save your energy for the battle."

Abinadab and Shammah probably felt that David was receiving exactly what he deserved.

David was the brother not dressed in armor.

David was the brother running off at the mouth.

David was the runt.

If Abinadab and Shammah had said anything, they too would have told David to go home. But they kept their peace, and David got the silent treatment. Now that hurts. Have you ever been in a position where members of your family gave you the cold shoulder?

David could say to you, "I know how you feel." And we can learn from David's reaction. David did not grow angry and throw the cheese at his brothers. David did not stomp off, cross his arms, or return to those few sheep. David just ignored their pessimism and kept striving to be the teenager God would have him to be.

Ignoring sarcasm and put-downs is not easy. For most people, insults will dry their bones. And for people like Brad, whose hearts are weak from constant abuse, the Scriptures are a wonderful retreat.

David himself wrote later in his life,

**“Princes also sit and speak against me, but Your servant meditates on Your statutes. Your testimonies also are my delight and my counselors” (Psalm 119:23,24).**

David fell on his knees before God on many occasions. And according to Psalm 119, David faced ridicule from strangers, friends, acquaintances, and even insults from loved ones.

Brad could have lied and spread nasty rumors to his classmates in hopes of creating hate towards the bully. But instead, he chose to discover how God would have him react. And Brad looked to the right place — the Holy Scriptures — David’s own “delights and counselors”.

Yes, revenge is tempting. But expressing love conquers all.<sup>3</sup>

## Chapter 9

# *Friends Versus Companions*

**“Each friend represents a world in us, a world possibly not born until they arrive, and it is only by this meeting that a new world is born.” — Anais Nin**

A week after the seventh session at Backwoods, I returned to school for my junior year. It was great to see all of my old friends. Sam had grown a beard, Susie Joe was a little cuter, classes were used for socializing, no homework, people wore their best clothes to impress people they did not like, and our upcoming basketball season was the talk of the school. When the school year is new and exciting, so are weekend drinking parties. I graduated with fifty-five students, and when there was a party, it seemed like everyone and their friend attended.

I remember when the first day of school was concluding. I thought to myself, “Great, everyone has grown up a little bit. I can re-establish some relationships and let the guys know how I have changed. Maybe I can even get them to listen to me concerning God. I just hope there isn’t a party anytime soon.”

And as soon as the thought left my mind...

“Hey, Russell. Sam is throwing a party Friday night. Are you going?”

Fortunately, I had made plans to go to a youth rally with Jason that weekend. So I said,

“I am going out of town.”

My friend said to me, “Cancel your plans. It’s the first week of school. Everybody’ll be there.”

I answered, “I can’t. I know it will be fun, though. Tell everyone I said ‘Hi’.”

Even today people often ask me, “Why don’t you just go and have a Yoo-Hoo or something? These people are your friends.”

I would have loved to have gone and just had a Yoo-Hoo. Even now, when my friends from college invite me to the drinking parties, I still want to go. I love socializing and meeting new people. But the Holy Scriptures speak against drinking parties.

**“For we have spent enough of our past lifetime in doing the will of the Gentiles — when we walked in lewdness, lusts, drunkenness, revelries, *drinking parties*, and abominable idolatries. In regard to these, they think it strange that you do not run with them in the same flood of dissipation, speaking evil of you. They will give an account to Him who is ready to judge the living and the dead” (1 Peter 4:3-5, Italics mine).**

There are various views on the consumption of alcohol. You may take the position of what I shall call the east spectrum: “I do not drink alcohol because I have seen alcohol ruin too many lives. I have witnessed too many drunks to believe that God approves of alcohol. God would never be in favor of something that has led to so much misery in the world.”

You may side with what I shall call the west spectrum: “Wine is in itself good, just as sex with my spouse is good. I will enjoy a glass of wine just as I enjoy sex with my spouse. Now the abuse of wine and the abuse of sex are wicked things. But I will not cease engaging in sex with my spouse because there exist rapists and sex offenders.”

At the present moment, I have not found a cookie-cutter answer concerning the Christian’s consumption of alcohol. If you have visited Romania, you will discover that many Christians have a glass of wine with their supper [privately as well as publicly] and think nothing of it. But if you visit the southern states of North America you will find that many Christians consider drinking a glass of wine [privately as well as publicly] as sin.

I would like to elaborate much more on this, but there is too much to say. I will leave you with a few points to consider.

In most countries, if not every country, you will find drinking laws. And those laws may include age restrictions.

First, we as Christians are commanded to obey the laws of the land in which we are living.

**“Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves” (Romans 13:1,2).**

Second, we must honor the wishes of our parents [guardians].

**“Children, obey your parents in all things, for this is well pleasing to the Lord” (Colossians 3:20).**

Third, we must take into account how our example is affecting those around us.

Let us imagine that a sister introduces a boy to me to whom she is teaching Christ, and he says to her,

“Hey, that guy was at the party last night. Everyone got trashed.”

Even if I was not drinking, I had been at a party where “everyone got trashed”. What kind of message had I portrayed for this young man? My sister may then think I am a liar. A lie is not just the use of words but an intentional plan to deceive. You may think, “Well, she should confront you and find out why you were there.”

I agree. But what if she doesn’t? What if a younger sister or brother finds out that I went to the party, and he or she decides from my example that drunkenness is acceptable? What if they start going to the parties and *they* get drunk? And what will their example do to the Christians watching them?

I understand that I must not worry about meeting the approval of others. But the Christian has been commanded to be aware of how his actions influence people. Remember, since God is the Father, the Christian’s actions reflect Him. Paul wrote that Christians should flee even the appearance of evil.<sup>1</sup>

**“It is good neither to eat meat nor drink wine nor do anything by which your brother stumbles or is offended or is made weak” (Romans 14:21).**

**“Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never again eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble” (1 Corinthians 8:13).**

Read Romans 14:14-21 and 1 Corinthians 8:9-12 carefully and strive to understand each and every word. Do this, and in my opinion, when alcohol is set before you, you will possess the wisdom to know how you should behave regardless of your location in the world.

There is so much to share, so much to say concerning alcohol. Alcohol is a very touchy subject involving serious study of the Scriptures. I challenge you to study these things on your own. But be careful. Many people are prone to take examples in Scriptures, add their personal experiences and then draw a line for themselves. That is fine. But the danger is when people make their lines biblical laws and try to force those laws on others. If you do not have a “thus saith the Lord” Scripture to back up your belief, then I suggest you be cautious if teaching it (Revelation 22:18,19).

## **New Life**

This was the year [my junior year] that I began to read the Bible. I was not too fond of reading anything other than Men's Health magazines. But I was amazed at the vast knowledge and amount of comfort I received in reading the Holy Scriptures. I read the New Testament first and then I read the Old Testament. Ecclesiastes is still one of my favorites. I also began reading small booklets discussing laws set forth in the Bible. I wrote down my questions and phoned John Rice for guidance. He only answered my questions with questions and then provided Scriptures for me to read. I believe this is a wise teaching method, for the student learns how to study and is then more appreciative when answers are revealed.

School seemed to become quite difficult. My new life reminded me of a child adjusting to a new bicycle. I struggled with knowing what to say and how to get my values across without sounding self-righteous. That is why I never told my friends that I was going to youth rallies. I would say, “I am going out of town” or “I am going to hang out with some friends.” Was I ashamed of being a Christian? No. I just was not sure how my friends would react to my new life. And I discovered that, if I planned my weekends in advance, it was much easier to turn down the

invitations to go to the drinking parties. There is nothing more tempting than for a friend to urge me to go someplace, when that place is where I long to be.

Do not misunderstand what I am saying. I am not suggesting that we excommunicate our non-Christian friends. I have many non-Christian friends. If we were to associate only with other Christians, we could not carry out the Great Commission<sup>2</sup> and the world would remain lost. But there is a difference between a friend and a companion.

Our friends are simply *our friends*. Friends might be the people you call occasionally or the people with whom you associate at school. But our *companions* are our special friends with whom we surround ourselves. These are the people we spend our weekends with and call when a crisis erupts in our lives. It is our companions in whom we are confident.

It appears to me that my companions say much about the person that *I* am. I associate with those with whom I can be myself. Common people share common interests.

**“Each of you, individually walkest with the tread of a fox, but collectively ye are geese.” — Solon, Greek Statesman and Poet, 6th Century B.C.**

My friends at school seemed to aim only for sex and drinking parties — all subjects that had once consumed my mind as well. And during that time, I had not really thought that line of thinking to be so bad. Those were the things I thought about, my friends thought about, what we discussed — was there any teenager who didn’t? But as I began to read the Bible and associate with other Christians, I realized that what I had once thought of as diamonds were actually fragments of glass. I was amazed at how my thinking had begun to change. I began to redirect my thoughts toward the goal of helping people and expressing the Love described in 1 Corinthians 13.

In 1609 Francis de Sales wrote to Philothea,

**“Just as when goats touch sweet almond trees with their tongues they make them turn bitter, so too much corrupt souls and infected**



**hearts can scarcely speak to anyone of their own or the other sex, without causing them to fall in some degree from modesty...For those who live in the world and desire to embrace true virtue it is necessary to unite together in holy, sacred friendship. By this means they encourage, assist, and lead one another to perform good deeds.”<sup>3</sup>**

**“...Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?” (1 Corinthians 5:6).**

**“Do not be deceived: Evil company corrupts good habits” (1 Corinthians 15:33).**

**“The righteous should choose his friends carefully. For the way of the wicked leads them astray” (Proverbs 12:26).**

Eventually, I was never in Fyffe on the weekends, and my friends gave up inviting me to the drinking parties. I began spending my weekends with Jason. He and I grew passionate for God. We traveled to every youth rally and every youth conference in Alabama, east Georgia, and southern Tennessee. We would load the car with luggage, food, and Yoo-Hoos; we did not mind how long the drive. We invited Ken, and he wanted to accompany us, but his parents were very protective. We saw our friends from Backwoods and met new faces from all over Alabama.

After a few weeks in school, my synergy for Christ [that I had developed at Backwoods] began to wear off. But when Jason and I returned from the youth rallies, I felt rejuvenated. So I asked myself “What *is it* that brings me closer to Christ?”

- 1) Associating with other Christians, for it is Christ living in them.
- 2) Singing praises to God.
- 3) Prayer and reading the Scriptures, for this is communication with God.

By applying these three areas to my life, I found that I remained passionate in my life for Christ when I could not attend the rallies.

It was at these rallies that Ferryn and I would see each other. She even gave me her phone number, and I started calling her. We let each

other know of the youth rallies, Christian college visitations, retreats, and what not. My mom hounded me about the phone bill, and God bless her soul, finally purchased a phone card for me.

There is one youth rally I remember in particular.

It was the middle of February, 1998 when Jason and I attended a state-wide youth rally at the Betta-View Hills congregation in Oxford, Alabama. Ferryn could not make it to the rally until Saturday, so I told her that I could only make it to Friday's event. But of course, I could stay until Saturday — I wanted to test her anticipation of my attendance. I could tell that Ferryn and I were drawing closer to one another, but I was unsure of what exactly "close" entailed.

Ferryn said, "Well Dad is attending a board meeting at the Oxford church Friday night, about ten minutes down the road from Betta-View. His meeting starts at 6:00 pm. The youth rally starts at 7:00 pm. Maybe I can go to the meeting with Dad, you guys can come and get me and then have me back around 9:30 pm when his meeting ends."

I was quite flattered that Ferryn felt that strongly to meet with us, so I confessed to her that I was staying until Saturday. She said, "How long have you known this?!"

"Since I first told you about the youth rally," I replied.

She answered with a smile in her voice, "You rat!"

Friday night, when we went to pick up Ferryn, not a soul was at the building. The meeting had been canceled. That night at the youth rally, Jason saw one of his old girlfriends, Rachel. She had some friends with her: Jackie and "the other two". He hoped to rekindle his relationship with Rachel, and he asked if we could join the girls following the youth rally. So we did.

Jason and I took our luggage to our host family's home, and the house-mother told us to stay out as long as we wished, but to lock the door when we returned.

Having no curfew was exciting, but we knew not to abuse the privi-

lege. We returned around midnight. When we went to our cars after the rally, Jackie decided that she would ride with us, forsaking her three friends. She was very unreasonable. She would not sit in the back seat, and she would not share the passenger seat with Jason [Jason refused to sit in the back], and so she sat in the uncomfortable floorboard in between the two front seats.

She kept asking me, "Can I drive?"

I answered, "Are you crazy? You want us to die?"

Granted, Jackie was attractive, with short, brown hair, brown eyes, slender figure, but her mind could conjure up some astonishing things. Sometimes she would grab my right leg and squeeze it like mad. Jason thought my predicament was amusing.

Once we left the driveway, Rachel pulled her car up to the passenger side to discuss with Jason what we were to do for the evening. I do not know if it was the moonlight shining through the windows, the warmth of the heater, or the knowledge that no one was watching, but my eyes met Jackie's, and she gave me the most seductive look. The next thing I knew I was sitting back down in my seat, having kissed her. It was just a small kiss. As soon as I had time to think of what I had just done, I regretted doing it.

Just as I had returned to my seat, Jason whipped his head around to share with me Rachel's idea, but he stopped in mid-sentence. He just stared at me. Jason knew exactly what had happened. And I knew that he knew, for he grinned from ear to ear.

I remember thinking, "Okay, Russell, now you've done it. Here you've gone and kissed Jackie. Ferryn will be here tomorrow. Good idea, Russ."

I think that I can speak for many young lads when I say that I never asked for that purple troll named "Testosterone". And throughout the years as teenagers, young men are adjusting to this strange creature. Testosterone, the best as I can describe him, reminds me of a drunken wild man behind the wheel of a Mack truck speeding down the highway of mind and body, pounding his horn and screaming slurred obscenities.

Unexpected things occur.

I am not attempting to excuse my actions that night. I am just calling attention to the fact that, as a result of hormones, many times teenagers do not understand why they do some of the things they do. Even today, I still do not know why I kissed Jackie. It must have seemed fun and exhilarating at the time.

I decided that I was not going to kiss Jackie again. But she tried to make me. She kept leaning in, and I kept turning my head. She kept grabbing my leg, and I kept pushing her hand away. She would get frustrated and ask Jason what she should do or say to reignite our momentary flare. Jason just laughed. Finally, I apologized to Jackie for kissing her, and I told her about Ferryn. Jackie said to me,

“Ferryn’s not here right now. She would never know.”

I replied, “I would.”

Jackie said, “I know. I’m just fifteen...A little girl.”

I looked her in the eye, raised my seventeen-year-old left eyebrow and said in a serious tone,

“That’s not going to work.”

When we finally went our separate ways, Jason laughed all the way to our host family’s house.

He said to me, “What’s wrong with you? She was fine! A girl who is nice looking, wanting to make-out with you, who would turn it down?”

I said to him, “I didn’t feel right about it. Kissing her was a mistake.”

Jason answered, “Well, you’re stronger than me.”

I replied, “Ferryn will be here tomorrow. I like her — not Jackie.”

The next day at the rally, Jackie made sure to sit beside me. There was no sign of Ferryn.

“Where’s that girl?” asked Jackie. “Why don’t you put your arm around me?”

I looked at her and said, "Nah girl," as if I thought she was kidding.

"Is that her?" asked Jackie.

I turned around to find Ferryn smiling at me. She had two friends with her, but there was no room left on our pew, so they found seats on the opposite side of the church building.

During the next break, Ferryn and I greeted one another with a long hug and we found seats together. I do not remember the first speaker or what he said. My mind was clouded by thoughts of Ferryn. I wondered if she was thinking of me as much as I was thinking of her. During the lunch break, Ferryn and I sat together and talked about all that had taken place in the last few months. Many of our Backwoods friends spoke to us, and we all enjoyed one another's company.

Soon, we returned to the auditorium where the keynote speaker concluded the day's events. That day was the first time that I heard Willie Franklin speak. He had played professional football but quit to focus all his time in Christian ministry. I had never seen Willie before, but I had no trouble picking out a 6'3", 240-pound black man sitting amidst two hundred white teenagers.

Willie's top physical condition and his understanding of teen life led me to believe that he was around thirty years old or so. I had never heard of or even considered the subjects that Willie taught; dating should wait until one was ready for marriage and an intimate kiss should only be shared between a husband and wife.

Being seventeen, with girls on my mind 24/7, Willie's messages were hard to grasp. No way would I quit kissing. I felt that I was doing well to keep myself away from sex. Though I enjoyed Willie's lesson and respected his aspirations, I decided his message was his own opinion. I was convinced that such doctrines were fanatical. Too extreme for me. And I pushed the ideas aside.

Ferryn sat to my left while Willie was speaking. Our arms were crossed, and our shoulders touched. Her left hand was tucked under her right arm, and my right hand was tucked under my left arm. My fingers

explored her arm until I found the edge of her fingers. I looked at her to find a smile on her face, which she tried to conceal by clenching her lips together. She would not look at me but opened her hand and grasped mine, and that is how we sat for the rest of the lesson. After the youth rally, Ferryn invited Jason and me over to her friend Andrea's house. I just happened to bring five tapes of "The Wonder Years" — a television series that we had all watched while we were younger. The show had been canceled for years. When our friends from Backwoods discovered what we were planning to watch, Andrea's living room filled with teenagers.

Since many of our friends were there, Ferryn and I were not able to spend time alone. But seeing her and sitting with her was enchanting enough. Later that night, Jason and I packed our things and returned home.

While traveling to those events as teenagers, Jason and I rarely spent our money — the church families opened their homes to provide housing and food for all the travelers. Our money was used only for gas. We were having a great time and building relationships with families all over the southeast.

During the months of August through November, Jason and I were away almost every weekend. If something happened and we could not make it to an event, we would go see a movie or go out to eat — together. There were times when we would spend Friday through Sunday at one another's house. Sure, I still associated with my friends at school, and we talked about basketball, girls, and other guy stuff. But Jason and I scheduled our weekends together. I found myself enjoying the best of church and the best of school — God and athletics. And I loved it!

Jason encouraged me beyond belief. I started becoming bold at school, and I would tell my friends about the youth rallies and retreats. When the guys discovered why I would no longer attend the drinking parties, they would say things such as,

"Russell, think about all the estrogen that will be there! Just come! You don't have to drink, you can laugh at us!"

A close friend of mine who stood nearby added,

“Well, I’m a Christian, and I still go to the parties. I set the example by not drinking.”

I replied, “Yeah and I’m sure your example has inspired every one of them to put down their beers and have cokes instead.”

He replied, “Well, they need a DD [designated driver].”

I answered him, “Maybe the reason they get wasted is because they know you’re there to be their mother. You’re actually encouraging everyone by showing up as the DD. If the party gets out of hand, and they can call you, then you can go get them.”

When I spoke to my friends, I tried not to condemn them. I just lived my life the best I could, strove to reflect Jesus in my language and actions, and prayed and hoped that seeds would be planted.

I was taught lesson after lesson that it does matter what kind of people with whom I surround myself. Do you not know this as well? Is it not much easier to live as a Christian when surrounded by Christians? I know that if it were not for Jason, I may have eventually started partying just so that I would not be by myself on the weekends. Does that sound strange? Not at all. Remember, relationships and communication are a key part in human development. You should never scold yourself for a desire to belong. But should you ever compromise your character, or lower the standards that God has set in your life, to impress a group of people who, in a matter of years, will graduate and head their separate ways?

Since my high school graduation, I can count on one hand the number of classmates that I have seen since. Friends come and go. All things will pass...all things.

**“And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever” (1 John 2:17).**

We think that sacrificing some close friendships will hurt. Sacrifice does hurt. No one likes to break a relationship — not even Jesus. Jesus wants to be a part of your life. He does not want your relationship with

Him to grow stale. And Jesus cannot get all of you until you get all of Him. Jesus relates Himself to a shepherd who, having a hundred sheep, will leave the flock to seek one sheep that is missing.<sup>4</sup> He will call for you and search for you until He finds you. But that is all He can do. You alone must choose whether to leap into His arms or continue your own way.

C.S. Lewis taught that freewill tests true love.<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps that explains the forbidden fruit planted in Eden.



## Chapter 10

# *Books and Mentors*

**“But David said to Saul, ‘Your servant used to keep his father’s sheep, and when a lion or a bear came and took a lamb out of the flock, I went after it and struck it, and delivered the lamb from its mouth; and when it rose against me, I caught it by its beard, and struck it and killed it. Your servant has killed both lion and bear; and this uncircumcised Philistine will be like one of them, seeing he has defied the armies of the living God...The Lord who delivered me from the paw of the lion and the paw of the bear, He will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine.’ And Saul said to David, ‘Go, and the Lord be with you!’” (1 Samuel 17:34-37).**

**Y**ou and I are taking a ride in my car. The temperature outside my vehicle is below freezing. We are in Fort Payne, Alabama, about twenty minutes from Fyffe. The snow has capped the surrounding mountains and glows under the moonlight.

Where are we going? I am taking you to visit my mentor, Billy Colburn. He was my Wednesday night Bible teacher throughout my teenage years. He coached football and wrestling at Fort Payne High School for over 20 years.

The date of our visit is December 1999 — five months before my high school graduation.

The sounds of Country Christmas songs, by the group Alabama, fill the car. The heater has kept us warm so far. My hot chocolate has really hit the spot. You never told me what my mother fixed you before we left the house. Whatever it is, you must like it — you have been sucking it down pretty fast!

We are approaching the driveway.

We park beside the curb in front of a house resembling a spilt-level log cabin. To our left, a streetlight exposes a rusted and worn basketball

goal. As we step out of the car, the freezing wind chaps our faces, and snow flurries decorate our clothes with little white specks. We approach the side door where we find a brass plate with the inscription:

*"As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."*

I ring the doorbell.

Christmas music echoes through the house, and the sound of footsteps grows louder. The door opens and Billy's wife, Joy, shouts,

"Come in! Come in! A little cold out there isn't it?"

The house is warm, and the air is filled with the sweet aroma of freshly baked gingerbread cookies. Antique clocks, angel sculptures, and miniature Santa Clauses decorate the kitchen walls. Pictures of hundreds of family and friends shower the refrigerator. Fresh fudge brownies overflow a plate on the dinner table. Billy comes around the corner.

"Hey! Come on in! Take those coats off. You want something to eat or drink? Joy just made some gingerbread. Help yourselves. We have some brownies there on the table. Grab you a handful and come on in here to the living room."

We follow Billy into the next room as my friends Daniel, Randy, and Jonathan stand to shake your hand. The white lights that hang from the Christmas tree create a relaxing glow in the room. We sit down on the couch, and Billy leans back into his recliner. He offers us some Hershey Kisses that fill a bowl on the end-table. Scanning the room, we see a picture of Jesus, his head leaned back in laughter, hanging above the stairway. Pictures of Billy's son, Roman, and his daughter, Jacey, hang on the living room walls. Roman is dressed in his football jersey from when he played for the University of Alabama in 1992 (the year Alabama defeated Miami in the National Championship).

Pictures and portraits of Jacey are sewn into pillows and lay scattered across the couch. One pillow has a picture of her when she won Homecoming Queen at Fort Payne High School. The picture captures Jacey's smile as she looks at her escort — her dad. Jacey's volleyball, soccer, and basketball jerseys are all retired and hang inside the school's gymnasium. Jacey was killed in a car accident a week before her broth-

er played in the 1992 National Championship. She was 17. Behind us on the wall hangs a life-size drawing of Jacey. Her eyes seem to stare back at us, creating a sense that she is in the room.

Joy walks in with a tray of mugs filled with French Vanilla cappuccino.

“If you guys want some more cookies, I left some out on the kitchen table for you. There are plenty to go around.”

Joy walks upstairs, and Billy asks us how things are going at school. We talk for a while and one of the others says,

“All of my friends at school are beginning to get drunk. I went to one of their parties the other night. I promised myself that I wouldn’t even pick up a beer so that I could be an example, but I did. There’s going to be another one in a week. All they talk about is drinking parties and stuff like that. It’s hard when that’s all they want to do on the weekends.”

Billy answers. His voice like that of a father.

“It’s easy to be good around good people. And it’s easy to be bad around bad people. You might ask, ‘Well, what do you mean, Coach?’ While I was stationed in Germany, a preacher there told us about a man named Mr. Smord. Mr. Smord was an old man who lived in a cabin near a small, country town. Mr. Smord had attended church his whole life, but as time passed, he started to slack off a bit until, eventually, he had quit attending church altogether.

“One Sunday afternoon, two of the ladies from church stopped by his house to check on him. Mr. Smord invited them in, but remained in his rocking chair near his cozy, warm fireplace. The ladies visited with him for a while and told him that everyone at church missed him. Mr. Smord told them that he did not need church, that he could worship God just the same by sitting in his rocking chair and reading his Bible. Discouraged, the ladies left and told the minister, Brother Jones, about the situation.

“The following Sunday, Brother Jones journeyed to the cabin and knocked on the door. Mr. Smord answered the door and said,

‘Come on in preacher. Take a seat...what can I do for you?’

“Brother Jones and Mr. Smord both sat in rocking chairs and Brother Jones replied, ‘Brother, we have been missing you at church.’

‘I have decided to stay here in this nice, warm house on Sunday’s and just worship the Lord here,’ answered Mr. Smord.

“Brother Jones gazed at the fire, as the flames danced on the coals. He then stood and walked towards the chimney. He took a poker and removed one of the coals from the fire and placed it on the hearth. Brother Jones returned to his seat and the both of them watched the coal with its blazing, bright colors. But in a matter of seconds, a single stream of smoke arose from the coal, and the coal slowly turned black. After the smoke cleared, Brother Jones walked back over to the hearth and picked up the coal with his hands, and tossed it back into the fire. Before brother Jones returned to his seat, the coal burst in flames and burned as hot as ever. Brother Jones said, ‘Well, I am preaching tonight, so I must leave.’

Mr. Smord arose, shook brother Jones’ hand and said,

‘Thanks for the sermon. It was the best I have ever heard. I understand. I need Christian fellowship. It encourages me.’

Brother Jones said, ‘Then I will see you tonight?’

Mr. Smord replied with a smile, ‘You bet.’”

Billy teaches us lessons from the story until the clock strikes 11:00 p.m. It is time for us to be heading home. We thank Joy for the cookies, and we thank Billy for inviting us over. Billy stands and hugs all of us one by one and tells us to come back soon. Daniel, Randy, and Jonathan shake our hands and we exchange good-byes. We depart from Billy’s house with stomachs filled and spirits lifted.

Encouraging words from someone I respect or admire is as refreshing as a glass of cool water. I have spoken with many people in the body of Christ. I have read many books. And I have found that only a small portion of my knowledge is from personal experience. It was Isaac Newton who said that all the knowledge he had gained was by standing

on the shoulders of giants. All I know, and all I will ever know, will be based upon my little experience and lessons from books and mentors. In facing an obstacle in life, wisdom is golden. But wise decisions can only be made from the gleanings of knowledge from those who have been there before — who have seen and experienced things beyond our grasp. Books and mentors take accounts, events, and predicaments we will face tomorrow and lay them before our eyes as blue-prints today. And anything that helps to keep us from making mistakes in our lives is a blessing from God.

**“Apply your heart to instruction and your ears to words of knowledge” (Proverbs 23:12).**

**“A wise son heeds his father’s instruction, but a scoffer does not listen to rebuke” (Proverbs 13:1).**

**“He who walks with wise men will be wise, but the companion of fools will be destroyed” (Proverbs 13:20).**

If King Saul had told David to go home, then the epic story of David and Goliath would have never taken place. But King Saul said to David,

“I believe in you. I know you can do it. Go.”

David knew that facing Goliath was not just a battle for his own life, but a war to ensure the future and freedom of Israel. If David had continued to listen to his brother’s ridicule, David *would have* returned home to those few sheep. But David ignored Eliab’s discouragement. Instead he embraced King Saul’s encouragement — and that made all the difference.

And so the warrior of Ephes Dammim made his way down the mountain and toward the Philistine army.

## Chapter 11

# *Distractions*

**“It’s easy to get the players. Getting them to play together, that’s the hard part.” — Casey Stengel**

When basketball practice began during my junior year of high school, I was reunited with my old teammates with whom I had been raised. All the players were sacrificing sweat and blood for starting positions on the Varsity. Those first two weeks of practice were always the worst because the coach tested us — to distinguish the devoted hearts from the careless souls. Step-and-slide drills, full-court lay-ups, scrimmages, and sprints dominated our hours of training. I can still hear our head coach scream,

“MOVE! MOVE! Hey! Stay on your feet when he fakes like that, and you won’t be riding his back! This is basketball, not a rodeo! Who wants it bad enough? Hey boys, let me tell you, the water is just right over there. If you want a drink, go ahead. No one will get mad. No one will get angry.”

Of course drinking from the water fountain meant that you were signing off the team.

Tim had been point guard during the years that we had been separated due to my repeating a grade.<sup>1</sup> The point guard brings the basketball to the opposite end of the court to set and direct the plays. The point guard is like the coach on the court. This is the only position that I had held [for ten years] throughout my basketball career. If I had been competing with anyone else on the team but Tim, there might have been some contention. But Tim and I teamed up during the shooting and passing drills and shook hands following each exercise.

Moans from the locker room followed every practice: legs numb from the running, lips swollen from being hit by reckless elbows, and feet bleeding from broken blisters. When I made the starting line-up as point guard, Tim became the sixth man; he was the substitute for both point

guard and shooting guard. This was great, because Tim and I were able to battle along side one another.

During the middle of the season, we defeated the number one ranked team in the state on their home court. Tim and I danced as the shouts and screams from our teammates filled the locker room. Fans said that we were good enough to compete at the Regional Tournament.

But just as the pendulum can swing to the right, it can swing to the left. As the middle of the season approached, we began to lose many of our games and Pessimism became our team's mascot.

Fyffe High School produced some outstanding athletes, and each of my teammates could start for any school in the county. As I reflect on that season, only now can I understand why we were losing. Most teams consist of players who become wrapped up in romantic relationships, some smoke marijuana, others drink themselves to drunkenness throughout the weekends, and some players consider the game as merely fun and giggles, while others consider their performance a matter of life or death. Students who rarely lift a ball will rag the team about a bad game, while others assume that their advice will help the team to a championship. Pictures and statistics of talented ball players fill the newspapers and often create competitive spirits between teammates. Many times, this leads to teammates striving to outperform one another so that their name will appear in the headlines.

"Team" became "Me".

Now this might seem minor to an outsider, but when such calamities pile up, the season creates personal stress that may serve as an additional stress to family problems and academic failings. Some teams work together while other teams fall apart. We fell apart.

A fan once said to me sarcastically,

"Why don't you ask help from the Lord? You have so much faith in Him."

I suppose that obnoxious man was merely venting steam from the frustration of our losses.

Some time ago, I spoke to an old teammate, who said to me,

“My spiritual life faded during the season. I would curse the people that we played against, curse the referees, and curse the ball. I think that is where I began to fall away from God.”

I too cursed the ball when I missed a basket. I cursed the referees for their blindness and even cursed the rude and ill-mannered fans supporting the opposing teams. Even though it was all committed under my breath, the conviction from my sin haunted my thoughts. Rather than correcting my habits and walking uprightly, I just said to myself, “Why should God help us if we all curse in His face?” I felt that these people deserved a good cursing. So I refused to control my tongue and my thoughts.

**“Better is the poor who walks in his integrity than one who is perverse in his lips and is a fool” (Proverbs 19:1).**

One evening after practice, my teammates and I were dressing, and I overheard one of my teammates damn his broken shoestring. I suppose if any of us had broken our shoestring, we would have shouted the same. Even the practices seemed to be a failure. And we all knew it. I felt devastated, angry, and discouraged with our season together. Worst of all, I felt a hundred miles from Christ.

My teammates were great players and nice kids. We had played with one another since elementary school. We knew each others thoughts; who really cared about the team and who only cared about himself. We knew who needed encouragement and who deserved scolding. But nothing I did or said helped. Our dreams were heading towards the dumps, and it seemed pointless to even try. I felt like I was going to break down in front of everyone if I did not get out of that “God-forsaken gym”.

I slipped on my shoes and shoved my practice uniform in my bag. I was the first one to escape from the locker room when a familiar voice called from behind.

I can still hear Tim say,

“Russell! Wait up.”

Tim and I spoke for just a moment. People were passing by, and we both knew to keep the conversation low. I still do not know how he found



the hurt in me. I tried my best to conceal my emotions. He patted me on the shoulder and assured me that everything would soon be fine.

And I desperately wanted to believe his words.<sup>2</sup>

**“Anxiety in the heart of a man causes depression, but a good word makes it glad” (Proverbs 12:25).**

## Silence

I wish that I could describe the honor of leading my teammates onto the court at the State Playoffs. But I cannot. We were defeated by Skyline High School at the semi-finals of the Area Tournament. If I could return to the night before the game, I would have told my teammates to go home and get some sleep. I would have told them to put down those beers. I would have told them that one night of fun was not worth jeopardizing our dreams. Instead I asked,

“Should you be drinking the night before the game?”

K. replied, “Shut up, Russell.”

The sad part is, I did shut up.

We all shared a friend, a foreign exchange student from Germany. He returned home the day of our game. We all went to his host’s house the night before to see him one last time. What first began as a farewell turned into a drinking party. Would the guys have listened to me if I continued to reason with them? Maybe not. But I wish that I had tried. Not everyone on the team drank. But two of our starters did, and I could tell it left a negative influence on their performance. Do I rest the loss on their shoulders? No. A loss is never the fault of one or two players, but the team as a whole. But if some of our starters were drinking the night before what might be our last game, and none of the other teammates uttered one word of rebuke, I believe that says a lot about what the game meant to them.

And as we walked into that dressing room after being beaten, I wanted to grab K. by the throat, slam him against the wall, and just glare into his eyes. That would have delivered the message. But I did not. There was no sense in it. The season was over. And when our tears [from those

who loved the game] subsided, after our coach spoke of how well we played and how he wished the seniors their best, after Tim and I hugged one another, when I realized that next year's team [where I would be the only returning starter] had no chance for a State Tournament, when I felt so far from God, I decided to go out drinking with some of my teammates.

The six-pack of punch was divided among the three of us. Drinking was fun while it lasted, but I will never forget the next morning. My heart mourned for our defeat. The victories and championships that I had imagined as a boy were lost. The sick feeling in my body reminded me of the alcohol I had drunk. I did not feel any better about my life — I felt worse. I had drunk away my heartache hours ago. But hours later, the heartache had doubled. Seven months had passed since Backwoods. Seven months of building a Christian reputation crumbled within hours. It is amazing how months, even years, of building a reputable name can be destroyed by the act of one foolish decision.

I got up from my bed that morning and walked into the bathroom, and there I stared in the mirror.

"You may fool Mom and Dad into thinking that you were just hanging out with the guys last night. But I know who you are, Russell. You are not fooling anyone. You are not fooling God. You are not fooling yourself. And the person you were last night died a long time ago. Be careful that you do not resurrect him."

### **Meeting Satan**

When I find myself sinning, or miserable from the guilt of sin, I do not want to acknowledge my mistakes before God. I do not want to admit that I am wrong. I do not feel like praying or reading my Bible. But it is not until I do these things and ask for His forgiveness that I can move forward and grow in Him. For if I do not grow, I die. If my communication with Him fails, the relationship fails. And when I do come back to God, when I admit that I am a sinful being who desires change, I can feel myself drawn to His presence. But I find myself questioning,

"After all that I have done, does God still want me? Does He still want me to be a part of His team?"

And God continues to answer my prayers and express His love for me in His own unique way. I have witnessed events in my life that could not have possibly taken place without God's intervention. I want to please Him. I want to serve Him. Not that He will love me any more — that is impossible. He loves me infinitely already. I just want Him to be proud of me.

I know what I should do, but I sometimes do not do it. I know that "such and such" will lead to sin but I do it anyway.<sup>3</sup> Why is this? I am human. But I must keep striving; continue repenting of my sins and growing, striving to show God that my life with Him is my priority. And God keeps using me in this life. But why? Perhaps this is His way of communicating that He loves me and cares for me, no matter what I do. But I do fear this one thing — that I may one day say to myself, "Russell, just do what you wish. You will have time to make amends with God before you die. God will always keep blessing you — after all, look at all the things you have done for Him."

That is when I will have turned my back on Jesus, when I will have forfeited my life and relationship with Him. That is when I will be lost. Not because someone stole my salvation, for that is impossible, but because I renounced it.<sup>4</sup>

And that is when Satan wins.

## Chapter 12

# *Sword*

**“Then he took his staff in his hand; and he chose for himself five smooth stones from the brook, and put them in a shepherd’s bag, in a pouch which he had, and his sling was in his hand. And he drew near the Philistine” (1 Samuel 17:40).**

The situation is different now than it was for David. David fought a physical war, but the Christian fights in a spiritual war. And spiritual wars demand spiritual weapons. Such battles consist of fighting the urge to cheat, fighting lust, fighting the urge to go to that place where we normally wouldn’t with that person whom we know we shouldn’t. The Christian strives for discipline to seek God’s counsel in all matters. The Christian fights to take the message to the lost, to tear down false doctrines erected by false teachers, to assist the poor, to aid the sick, and to help the blind to see.

**“For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 6:12).**

The Christian stands for truth, seeks the right, and establishes peace with his enemies. He builds his faith for troubled times. He practices mercy. He seeks justice. And he strives to love. And we do so with the Sword of God: the same Sword chosen by Jesus when He fought Satan face-to-face here on the earth.

**“Then Jesus was led into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And when He had fasted forty days and forty nights, afterward He was hungry. Now when the tempter came to Him he said, ‘If you are the Son of God, command that these stones be turned to bread.’ But He answered and said, It is written, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God’” (Matthew 4:1-4).**

Jesus had lived without food for 40 days. Fasting appears to me to be a form of prayer that basically says to God, “My hunger for You is more

important than my hunger for anything else.” Jesus’ weakness and exhaustion provided the devil with a golden opportunity to attack. The devil drew the same Sword against Jesus. Satan quoted Scripture.

**“Then the devil took Him up into the holy city, set Him on the pinnacle of the temple, and said to Him, ‘If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down. For it is written: ‘He shall give His angels charge over you and in their hands they shall bear you up lest you dash your foot upon a stone’” (Matthew 4:5,6).**

Satan quoted Psalm 91:11,12. Satan uses Jesus’ own weapon against Him. It has been my experience that Satan will many times attack my strengths before he attacks my weaknesses. And I have observed that this occurs just after I have focused all my energy in protecting myself from my weaknesses. Why? The Christian is always striving to better him or herself. And when we place our strengths on the back-burner so that we may focus more time to build up our weak areas, we have left our strengths open for attack. I think that is why Paul wrote,

**“Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall” (1 Corinthians 10:12).**

One might think that if the Supreme forces of Good and evil are battling alone in a wilderness that they would use supernatural powers.<sup>1</sup> But Jesus did not swirl His finger in the air to create a whirlwind to whisk the devil away.<sup>2</sup> Satan did not rain down fire.<sup>3</sup> Only the Word of God is used to fight within the spiritual realm.

Jesus responds,

**“It is written again, ‘You shall not tempt the Lord your God’” (Matthew 4:7).**

I once questioned why Jesus did not just turn those few measly little stones into bread to satisfy the devil — then be left alone to pray. But Jesus was aware of a long fact. Look at these next verses.

**“Again, the devil took Him up on an exceedingly high mountain, and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. And he said to Him, ‘All these I will give You if You will fall down and worship me’” (Matthew 4:8,9).**

Bungee-jumpers leap from buildings, and if we want to see a stone

turned to bread, we can hire a magician. I am sure that Satan has witnessed things our little human minds cannot even comprehend. Satan desires one thing — to be worshiped. And the devil has not changed. Jesus finally turned to Satan and retorted,

**“Away with you Satan! For it is written ‘You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only shall you serve.’ Then the devil left Him, and behold, angels came and ministered to Him” (Matthew 4:10,11).**

## **Sword Training**

It seems to me that many times we as Christians tend to underestimate the power of the Word of God. The Holy Bible is our Sword, which we use to carry out the Lord’s commands. The Word of God gives life to the dead in spirit, freedom to slaves of sin, and hope to the lost. The Bible can turn the devil in circles, make the haughtiness of men into the humblest of slaves, and change fools to Solomons. But more importantly, the Word of God exposes that which once lurked in darkness, and distinguishes the truth from lies.

**“For the word of God is living and powerful and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12).**

## **Its Proper Use**

“Russell, you can use the Sword as a meat cleaver or you can use it like a skilled heart surgeon, making small incisions and allowing that heart to heal. Harsh words and sarcasm are the techniques of the butcher,” as John Rice would say.

Many people [many religious teachers] will use their Sword, not to edify the person, but to arrogantly display their knowledge from past years of study. Many students first begin their studies, whether history, mathematics, science, etc., to discover hidden truths. But the end result is often an attitude of, “Observe my wisdom, little opponent, how dull you are and how much I shine.”

*Bread is pleasurable at first, but when molded it is cast to scavengers.*

I must admit that in times past, I too have found myself wallowing in arguments and possessing an attitude of “Aren’t I a wise chap?” And I have observed that arguing will profit nothing but only satisfy the heart of him or her who enjoys disputes.

In the words of Benjamin Franklin,

**“These disputing, contradicting, and confuting people are generally unfortunate in their affairs. They get victory sometimes, but they never get goodwill, which would be of more use to them.”<sup>4</sup>**

One may gain victory in a spiritual conversation. But is that the reason theology is discussed? Must there be missions to force opinions, traditions, and personal prejudices on the people of God? Must clay command clay? Does the Bible not lay forth the plan of salvation for the most simple-minded? Any person can start a quarrel — children are experts. Only the wise remains soft and patient while conversing with a quick-tempered simpleton.

**“It is honorable for any man to stop striving, since any fool can start a quarrel” (Proverbs 20:3).**

From my experiences and observations concerning arguments, such aggressive conversations never end in edification. A person remains silent merely to avoid an argument, or because he or she feels uncomfortable being opposed by dogmatic attitudes. And in the end, no one has changed opinions. Therefore, that particular conversation was not only pointless but actually burned bridges for later discussions.

**“But avoid foolish and ignorant disputes, knowing that they generate strife. And a servant of the Lord must not quarrel but be gentle to all, able to teach, patient...” (2 Timothy 2:23-24).**

Tell a dog that you hate it in a soft, gentle manner, and the dog will wag its tail. Tell the same dog you that you love it in a hateful manner, and the dog will place its tail between its legs and run. Not even a four-legged creature enjoys scorn. I had rather start a discussion with the idea that I may not only help others but that others may provide views that will provoke me to further study.

Ray Comfort once wrote,

**“If the person to whom you are speaking will not give you an ear,**

**just be gentle, prayerful, patient, and polite so that the door is left open for another time.”<sup>5</sup>**

Our Sword is the Word of God — Jesus made that clear. And since another’s heart is the target, may we use the Sword as a heart surgeon, with all gentleness and lowliness. May we be reminded that we, too, in times past have been in error. And may we remember our gratitude when Someone reached down and graciously lifted us from our knees. Let us learn to be effective heart surgeons. For who goes to a butcher for heart problems anyway?



## Chapter 13

# *Screaming in the Darkness*

**“There are sorrows to which all others are nothing. They change us. We can never again be what we were before, though we may seem so in the eyes of others. But we know that a part of ourselves is gone, and cannot come back again.” — Henry Wadsworth Longfellow**

As high school graduation grew closer, Tim, being a year older, prepared to take on the new world. All the seniors were good friends of mine, so I did not like the idea of remaining in school another year. Tim and his classmates began to skip school, and we juniors adopted the practice as well. We all met at a swimming pool behind a classmate's house. The upcoming summer dominated our minds, and beach trips were being planned one after the other. The Thursday before Easter weekend, Tim was sharing with me his plans to attend a community college on a full-tuition scholarship due to his talents in Drafting. I shared with him my excitement about the annual Lads-to-Leaders youth leadership convention that was to start the next day.

Fyffe High School was cancelled for Good Friday, so we said our goodbyes for the week on Thursday. I remember that particular Thursday as if it occurred last week. The last hour of school was concluding as I made my way to my locker opposite Tim's class. The door stood wide open, and Tim was talking and laughing with a friend. Tim just happened to glance toward me as I waved. He smiled and nodded his head.

I would not sell that smile for anything.

Mr. Wilson, the owner of the funeral home, said it was the largest funeral he had ever witnessed in DeKalb County. Tim was involved in a car accident that following Monday, and he passed away Wednesday.

I recall exiting the doors of the hospital just after his death Wednesday morning. I walked slowly through the soft drizzling, rain.

“If only I could go back to Thursday,” I thought. “I would have called Timbo out into that hall, wrapped my arms around him, squeezed him tightly and said...everything. Thanks, brother. Thanks for 17 years of family and friendship.”

I had remained at the hospital with Tim for those two days, and I felt utter exhaustion, anger, and despair. I raised my eyes to the sky and found Nothing but the sting from the rain that fell in my eyes. The sky was a gloomy painting, reflecting the same grayness that I felt.

The retired officer and war veteran Don Brown saluted the line of cars filled with family and friends as we made our way to the Green’s Chapel Baptist Church Cemetery. My heart echoed the words of David:

**“I cried out to God with my voice; And He gave ear to me. In the day of my trouble I sought the Lord; My hand was stretched out in the night without ceasing; My soul refused to be comforted. I remembered God, and was troubled; I complained, and my spirit was overwhelmed” (Psalm 77:1-3).**

No one can possibly imagine the pain of losing a loved one until they themselves share in that experience. Even now, I am slow to assume anyone can honestly say to you, “I’ve been there. I know what it is like.” A young man said that just following Tim’s death. I was almost offended. Had he lost a loved one? Perhaps. But he was not in my shoes at that moment. He was not aware of our last words shared, the last jokes exchanged or our years together — the holidays, basketball, Reedy Creek, or times like that night in the cornfield.

But this young man knew that I had lost a close friend, and he desired nothing more than to console me. I understood that he only cared, and that was comforting. You may have never lost a loved one — you will one day. Maybe this chapter can somehow help you to understand what is going through the hearts of the survivors.

I guess everyone who has lost a loved one reacts differently. Psychologists say that people who deal with grief follow a series of emotional steps: shock, anger, denial, and finally acceptance. But the effects of those emotions vary with each individual. I knew accepting Tim’s

death would take time. I do not believe that there is a twelve-step program in dealing with death. Death is like a wall. The only way to get past it is to climb it. And that is the challenge. Climbing demands strength, encouragement, perseverance, and most of all, Time.

Shock and denial were not my major issues. Rather, confusion swelled in my heart, resentment fumed, and my anger simmered.

In his book, **Traveling Light**, Max Lucado writes,

**“Why does grief linger? Because you are dealing with more than a memory — you are dealing with unlived tomorrows. You’re not just battling sorrow — you’re battling disappointment.”<sup>1</sup>**

I looked for someone to blame, and God became the target. During worship the following Sunday, I did not sing from joy. I sang from desolation. And I sang at the top of my lungs. Whether I hit the notes did not matter. I figured if God was really in that house, then He would hear me.

A minister named Jerry Jenkins once spoke of a time when he was handing out flyers, inviting people to church. Mr. Jenkins said that an elderly man looked at one of the flyers and said,

“I don’t want it.”

Mr. Jenkins asked, “Why not?”

The man replied, “I don’t believe in that God.”

Mr. Jenkins asked, “Why?”

The man said, “Because He took away my baby. And a year later, He took away my wife.”

Mr. Jenkins said to him, “I don’t believe in that God either.”

In his book, **A Grief Observed**, C.S. Lewis wrote, in dealing with the death of his wife,

**“God has not been trying an experiment on my faith or love in order to find out their quality. He knew it already. It was I who**

**didn't. In this trial He makes us occupy the dock, the witness box, and the bench all at once. He always knew that my temple was a house of cards. His only way of making me realize the fact was to knock it down."**

The depths of grief sent me searching for comfort. I did not want to read the Bible. I wanted to find someone to console me; someone who knew what grief can do to a person. So I drove to Billy Colburn's house.

I remember sitting on the couch holding one of the pillows that captured Jacey's homecoming picture. I just stared at her. Billy rocked in his recliner as I wiped tears from my eyes. He took a deep breath,

"You know, Russell, there are people, when they lose a loved one, who feel they can't live another day. Others strive to live one day to the next. Some days are harder than others. I know that one day I will see Jacey again. And when that day comes, I am going to just hold her and tell her that I love her. I am looking forward to that day. But right now, God has given me a mission here. And, Russell, he has given you a mission too."

I nodded my head. Billy was right. Someday, death will come to me as well. Maybe in fifty years. Maybe in ten years. Maybe tomorrow. I felt as if God was standing before me, still and silent, as I screamed from the cold, dark prison of my mind,

"God! What is my mission?!"

Billy's words are not always what I want to hear, but his messages are saturated with wisdom. I once heard that the only bad aspect of good advice is that it tends to interfere with our plans. I had been making plans to blame Something or Someone.

*But blame found not its place.*

It was only then that I realized how easily God could become a scapegoat.

## **To Feel Forsaken**

In his book, **Man to Man**, Charles Swindoll provides the most heartfelt questions many Christians ask when faced with adversity:

**“Doesn’t God care about me anymore?”**

**“Isn’t He the One who promised to help me?”**

**“If He is good, how can He permit this to happen to me?”**

**“Why doesn’t He answer my prayer — is He deaf?”<sup>3</sup>**

Asking such questions does not make anyone a bad person. Even John the Baptist was grieved at Jesus.<sup>4</sup> John the Baptist was thrown in prison after he told King Herod it was not lawful for the King to take Herodias as a wife.<sup>5</sup> And John became sour. He was sitting in a prison, while Jesus and the other disciples were out teaching and healing the multitudes. Look at what Matthew records.

**“And when John had heard in prison about the works of Christ, he sent two of His disciples and said to Him, ‘Are You the Coming One or do we look for another?’ Jesus answered and said to them, ‘Go and tell John the things which you hear and see: The blind see and the lame walk; the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear; the dead are raised up and the poor have the gospel preached to them. And blessed is he who is not offended because of Me’” (Matthew 11:2-6).**

Did John the Baptist not believe Jesus was the Messiah? Luke records that when Mary was pregnant with Jesus, she visited Elizabeth, who was pregnant with John. At the sound of Mary’s voice, the infant John leapt in his mother’s womb.<sup>6</sup> John himself later baptized Jesus, saying,

**“Behold! The lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29).**

John the Baptist had spent his entire life preaching Jesus to the people and was later beheaded for doing so.<sup>7</sup> John questioning Jesus’ majesty does not add up. To be honest, if John and I are anything alike, John was probably thinking,

“Here I am in this awful, cold prison, and after all I have done for Jesus, He has forgotten me.”

If I were John, I may have asked with much sarcasm,

“Are you really who you claim to be or do we need to find someone else?”

John did not send random messengers. John sent two of his own dis-

ciples. John knew Jesus would recognize them. And Jesus seems to be familiar with them for He replied “You go back and tell John...”

Jesus understood John’s message. Perhaps that is why Jesus added, “And blessed is he who is not offended because of Me.”

Jesus knew that soon both of them would be sitting together in heaven. We, as humans, [like John] tend to think of life as the here-and-now. But Jesus thinks eternally.

**“So teach us to number our days that we may gain a heart of wisdom” (Psalm 90:12).**

Imagine that we leaned an endless, stretching ladder against the sun. And an ant took a grain of sand and climbed all the way to the top of that ladder, dropped the grain of sand onto the sun and crawled all the way back down to earth only to repeat the same cycle. When all the beaches had vanished, when land itself was no more, the time spent achieving this task [when compared to eternity] is like the snap of one’s fingers.

When I was six, I wrecked my bicycle and cut my knee. It hurt! A few weeks later, I had forgotten about my knee, and I was riding my bicycle again. Twenty years from now, I am not going to complain about the times I caught the flu or the number of basketball games my team lost. Do you think John is still mourning over the time he spent in prison? Will we mourn the loss of loved ones while kneeling beside them in heaven? If I arrive into the Long Awaited, by the grace of God, I will seek out my family and friends, and as my good friend Wess Howell once said,

“...hang out by the river of life for a couple hundred years.”

Do you now see why Jesus asked John not to be offended? Jesus knew this present earth was not their home. Soon, both of them would stand together by the crystal sea.

**“For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us” (Romans 8:18).**

The next generation has stepped forward.

The same goals our team strived for are shouldered by another generation of athletes. The same hopes for Fyffe's Varsity are still discussed amongst the fans. The same screams are still shouted at the referees. The head coach is still reminding his players that basketball is not a rodeo. And the battles for starting positions are being fought as we speak.

My jersey is clinging to the back of some kid as he trains, as he dribbles the ball between his legs, as he stares at a treasured basketball poster that is mounted on his bedroom wall, as he helps his team to another victory or comforts them through another defeat. And today when the townspeople see me in Fyffe, some will say,

"You know, I think that kid played basketball here at one time."

And as a child, parent, or a fan walks by Tim's picture and his jersey in the glass frame, many will think to themselves,

"Tim Lingerfelt. Who's that?"

All that remains are memories and pictures capturing tiny fragments of time. But the mind forgets and paper perishes.

I do not write these things to depress you. I write these things so that you may know that there is a Something awaiting us far greater than we could ever hope for or imagine in this world. That is why we cannot be completely satisfied on this earth. We were not meant to be.

**"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our tribulations, that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God" (2 Corinthians 1:3,4).**

Later that year, Tim's basketball jersey was retired, and his picture still hangs on the wall in the Fyffe High School gymnasium.

## Chapter 14

# *The Last Game*

**“There is no feeling more desperate than to stand by and helplessly watch a chapter of your life close.” — Ericka Bennett**

“Russell, you’re welcome to come out here with us, but you might want to buy some cleats. If not, you’ll be sliding everywhere,” Coach Benefield replied.

I shook his hand and said, “Thank you Sir.”

The summer before my senior year had finally arrived: the last season of ever wearing a Fyffe High School uniform. This was the last year I would ever play basketball for any school. I wanted nothing more than to pour sweat, blood, and tears before the season was over. I had trained for 10 years. Summer basketball camps at David Lipscomb University and hours upon hours of weight and team training. In all my years, I never missed a team practice except one [during my senior year due to a fever]. Even then, I sat in the bleachers and watched the practice until the head coach told me to go home and get some rest.

My entire life had come down to this season. I did not mind how my basketball career would end as long as I could look back and know that I had given it my all.

Paul Benefield, Fyffe’s football coach, gave me permission to train with the football team. I took part in every one of their drills. We tied parachutes and sleds around our waists and ran sprints. We jumped boxes, jumped cones, and jumped rope. I drank water when they drank water and rested when they rested. And that summer I joined them four times a week for weightlifting and at 7:00 am every Tuesday and Thursday for agility training. Sometimes, Coach Benefield would rush me out of the weight room after everyone else had left.

I denied myself the pleasure of carbonated drinks, fried foods and desserts. That summer, and the entire school year, they did not so much



as touch my lips. Anything else that contained more than 6 grams of sugar was forbidden.<sup>1</sup>

I even made the Iron Man Team.<sup>2</sup> One of five athletes. Three of the other four football players who made it were Faps. Matt, one of my friends who played football, told me that after I made the Iron Man Team, they were all stretching for regular season practice and Coach Benefield said, as he paced back and forth in front of the team, “Did you boys hear about Russell Lingerfelt making the Iron Man Team? That’s right. AND HE DOESN’T EVEN PLAY FOOTBALL!” That day it was stated that one does not have to conform to the majority to be accepted or do what “everyone is doing” to be successful. I was myself. And that was just fine.

You would find me in the gymnasium on Friday and Saturday nights, practicing my moves, working on my shooting, striving to be better, while all my teammates were out on the town. Yesterday was forgotten. Last year’s starters were a memory. Our team in the upcoming year would not be as good, and our chances for a championship were slim. But we were going to fight — and fight we did.

The sweat fell from my nose as I stood at the half court line.

Skyline’s high school gymnasium was filled with parents and athletes from across the district — there to observe Section’s team — the team everyone assumed would defeat us in this Area Tournament. And why should Section not defeat us? They had done so twice that year.

Throughout the entire game we thought we might actually be victorious. For from the beginning of warm-ups, Section’s players had been acting silly, not taking a thing seriously, believing they had already won the battle. But our faces were grim. We were ready for war. Those pre-game stomach flutters, the adrenaline, and an anxious spirit are all feelings that I remember.

We led the game at times, and we fought hard. But near the end of the fourth quarter, Section took the lead and dominated us.

There was a short break in the game due to a foul, and one of my teammates was about to shoot two free-throws.

Blood slowly slithered onto my tongue from a busted lip.

I would not let the referees see my mouth. They would have taken me from the game.

I could barely breathe. My heartbeat pounded in my ears like a drum.

My lungs felt as if someone were standing on them.

The shouts and screams from the fans seemed distant, almost non-existent; like voices in a dream.

I placed my hands on my knees, bowed my head and watched my sweat drip onto the half-court line.

Memories sped through my mind at a million thoughts per second.

Images of Tim swept before my eyes; his voice echoed in my mind.

*"Everything will be alright. Russell, everything will soon be fine."*

I scanned the crowd. My thoughts tumbled one after the other.

*"Jason, what are you doing? Jason. My friend."*

Jason and I were no longer friends, though I had hoped so much that we would be until our hair turned gray.

There was a time when Jason and I could sit across the table and just look at one another and know exactly what the other was thinking — especially when it came to girls. We knew each other's deepest secrets. We drank from the same cup, rode to church and youth rallies together and even planned to attend the same college as roommates. We were inseparable.

But some of Jason's old friends began experimenting with marijuana. I remember Jason feeling crushed by the news.

"Russell, I know I can help save them," he said. "I know I can help them. And in order for me to do it, I need to hang out with them more. This is the only way I can influence them."

I tried to reason with him — that he could not do this alone. But he

thought I was wrong. Jason began devoting his entire time to his old friends, and they became his companions. Jason quit attending church. He quit returning my phone calls. He ended up in a rehabilitation center for alcohol and drug abuse. Jason gave up on himself, gave up on Christ, and I lost one more brother.

Paul told the Galatians,

**“Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted” (Galatians 6:1).**

Paul reminded the Galatians that they must be careful not to fall into the same temptation as their brethren and suffer the same fate. A warrior cannot forsake his infantry to fight the enemy alone, for the lion is seeking whom he may devour.<sup>3</sup> Satan has been toying with God’s people for thousands of years. Do you think that you are more cunning than he? Satan is an expert negotiator. Generations come and generations go, and every single person [except Jesus] who has ever walked upon this earth has fallen.<sup>4</sup>

*“Jason. How I wish that I had never let you go through with it.”*

The ball bounced at the free-throw line.

*“But you would not listen to me. I remember going to your house and confronting you. You were high on marijuana at the time. I had tried giving you encouragement when I saw you falling. I had tried writing to you, but you would not reply. Nothing seemed to work. So I felt that I was left with only one option — I scolded you. I said that you were weak, that you were compromising, and that you were failing. It was only an attempt to get you to think straight again. But it did not work, and resentment from you has fallen on my shoulders. May God forgive both of us.”*

The ball bounced a second time.

I looked up at the scoreboard and saw that a large part of my life was about to end. My basketball days were moments from becoming history.

Tears burned my eyes, but I fought them back.

I looked towards the bench, and there by the clock keeper stood my reinforcement. I was being taken out of the game so that another senior could savor these last few seconds.

The buzzer rang and a time-out was called. I took my seat with my fellow teammates.

Someone handed me a towel, and I buried my face in it.

Another's arm circled around my shoulders. I do not remember whose.

Seconds later, I was hugging the point guard from the opposing team — we had competed against one another since elementary school. Our coaches were cleaning up the water and gathering our towels, as the rest of us entered the dressing room. I walked over to the sink and looked into the red eyes that stared back at me; red from the sweat, red from the running, red from the tears that had not yet erupted. I stuck my head under the faucet — the cold water cooled my head.

"Russell."

I looked up into the mirror to find our head coach pointing towards the bench.

"Come on over, and let me talk to all of you boys."

I wiped the water from my face and made my way over to the bench to sit beside the assistant coach. He put his arm around me.

"Russell," Coach Taylor said, "If there is anything I can do for you, ever, you let me know."

I placed my index finger and thumb on my temples in an attempt to conceal the emotion in my eyes and fought back the tears.

Our head coach repeated the same farewell lines that I had heard the previous year. I do not remember all that was said. Did it really matter? I walked out of the locker room, and Dad and Wayne were awaiting me.

Dad gave me a side hug and said,

“You played good son. Keep your head up.”

I stepped towards to Wayne. He reached out to hug me, and I broke into tears and buried my face into his chest. Years of hope, years of struggle, years of victory and years of defeat were finished.

“It’s over Wayne. It’s finally all over.”

Three months later, my classmates and I graduated.

## Chapter 15

# *Until We Meet Face-to-Face*

**“And when the Philistine looked about and saw David, he disdained him; for he was only a youth, ruddy and good looking. So the Philistine said to David, ‘Am I a dog, that you come to me with sticks?’ And the Philistine cursed David by his gods. And the Philistine said to David, ‘Come to me, and I will give your flesh to the birds of the air and the beasts of the field!’**

**“Then David said to the Philistine, ‘You come to me with a sword, with a spear, and with a javelin. But I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel whom you have defied. This day the Lord will deliver you into my hand, and I will strike you and take your head from you. And this day I will give the carcasses of the camp of the Philistines to the birds of the air and the wild beasts of the earth, that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel. Then all this assembly shall know that the Lord does not save with sword or spear; for the battle is the Lord’s and He will give you into our hands.’**

**“So it was when the Philistine arose and came and drew near to meet David, that David hurried and ran toward the army to meet the Philistine. Then David put his hand in his bag and took out a stone; and he slung it and struck the Philistine in his forehead, so that the stone sank into his forehead, and he fell on his face to the earth.**

**“So David prevailed over the Philistine with a sling and a stone, and struck the Philistine and killed him. But there was no sword in the hand of David. Therefore David ran and stood over the Philistine, took his sword and drew it out of its sheath and killed him, and cut off his head with it. And when the Philistines saw that their champion was dead, they fled” (1 Samuel 42:51).**

**D**avid stands over the lifeless body, clenching the hair of Goliath’s head in his fist.

No longer was there room in David’s hand for cheese.

David points his finger toward the Philistine army. They scatter like rabbits.

### **To The Reader**

I want you to know that writing this book has truly been quite an experience. I hope that you read the Introduction; I never thought it would take four years to finish this work. I am sure that someday I will look back and wish I had said “this” and cut “that”. So perhaps I should say that this book is not finished; only abandoned.

I could not possibly share with you every single experience or name every person who had a hand in bettering my life or leading me closer to the throne of God. I will say that of the things I wrote to you, I never wrote a bit of fiction or anything that I myself do not strive to live by. And that is what I wished to accomplish with this book — speak the truth — even if it meant admitting to some of my own sins.

I would like to update you on a few of the people I mentioned.

Ken and I retained our friendship throughout high school, and we are still close friends today. We are both currently enrolled at Auburn University. Ken paid me a visit last night and congratulated me on the books publication. Wayne and I were roommates for two years, but then he graduated in Chemical Engineering and is currently living in Huntsville, Alabama. Rick [Tim’s brother] attended the University of Alabama and graduated in Communications.

Ferryn and I drifted apart as we grew older. She is now married to a great Christian man whom she met at Backwoods. Jason overcame his alcohol and drug problems. He decided to remain at the rehabilitation center as a staff member where he has helped many people overcome their addictions.

As you can tell, the story does not end here. God led me to discover my mission in life. He reveals more of it to me every day. There is more to share concerning Willie Franklin and his views concerning romantic relationships. I have not written anything about my experiences in college...

All of these things and more, if the Lord allows, shall be shared in another book.

**“Watch, stand fast in the faith, be brave, be strong. Let all that you do be done with love” (1 Corinthians 16:13-14).**

Because of Calvary.

Russell Lingerfelt



# *Notes*

## **Chapter 1:**

1. Brad is not the real name of the boy. And we did not exchange those exact lines but the same message was exchanged as well as the Scriptures.
2. Ecclesiastes 3:8

## **Chapter 2:**

1. I have spoken with many parents who claim that they have chosen not to “force Christ” on their children out of fear that their children might later rebel. I have yet to meet a child who enjoys being made to do anything. If I one day have children who enjoy eating healthy, taking vitamins, brushing their teeth, or taking baths when I ask them too, I suppose that I shall live a peaceful fatherhood. If values are instilled into the lives of children, values practiced by their parents, the children will, for the most part, embrace that heritage throughout their lives.
2. Johnson, David. 2000. **Reaching Out**. Seventh Edition. Pg. 15. Allyn and Bacon.

## **Chapter 3:**

1. Ecclesiastes 2:16
2. 2 Corinthians 6:6

## **Chapter 4:**

1. Swindoll, Charles. 1977. **David a Man of Passion and Destiny**. Pg. 38. Word Publishing.
2. God warned the Israelites not to engage in perverse sins such as sex

with animals (Leviticus 20:15). There are many examples recorded throughout the Old Testament where a people without God found no reason to withhold such disgraces.

2. Swindoll, Charles. 1977. **David a Man of Passion and Destiny**. Pg. 38. Word Publishing.

### Chapter 5:

1. I can probably count on both hands the number of times that I went out on a date during high school. I was not employed and did not feel comfortable asking my parents for money. Besides, I enjoyed time with Ken and my other buddies. My dad had always taught me that if I did not think that I could marry a certain girl then there was no sense in dating her. I agreed. Besides, I was not looking to be married anytime soon. I wanted a levelheaded Christian girl. And they are rare to find.
2. Acts 17:30

### Chapter 6:

1. Covey, Stephen R. 1989. **The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People**. Pg. 299. Simon and Schuster.
2. Ecclesiastes 1:9
3. Covey, Stephen R. 1989. **The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People**. Pg. 295. Simon and Schuster.

### Chapter 7:

1. Tombstone Hollywood Pictures. Cinergi Productions Inc N.V. and Buena Vista Pictures Distribution Inc.
2. By personal relationship, I mean a relationship like that of a friend. Jesus calls us His friends in John 15:15. A friendly relationship is begun and maintained by communication. One shouldn't think that God is hiding and that we must develop a twelve-step plan in order

for Him to lend us His ear (Isaiah 59:1). He is everywhere and is longing for our friendship (Matthew 23:37). We can communicate with God through the Holy Scriptures and through our prayers.

3. Swindoll, R. Charles. 1996. **Man to Man**. Pg 256. Zondervan Publishing House.
4. Matthew 9:20
5. Lewis, C.S. 1952. **Mere Christianity**. Pg. 127. HarperSan Francisco.

## Chapter 8

1. 1 Samuel 17:13-14
2. 1 Samuel 17:22
3. 1 Corinthians 18:4-8

## Chapter 9:

1. 1 Thessalonians 5:22
2. Matthew 28:19
3. Sales, Francis de. 1989. **Introduction to a Devout Life**. Pg. 161 & 175. Doubleday.
4. Luke 15:4-7
5. Lewis, C.S. 1952. **Mere Christianity**. Pg. 48 HarperSan Francisco.

## Chapter 11:

1. During my 9th grade year (age 15), I remained on the 9th grade team, while Tim and the other sophomores progressed to the B-Varsity.
2. You will notice that my years of basketball between my 8th grade to my junior year of high school (ages 14-17) are not mentioned. There is a lot left untold about the season discussed in this chapter. It is not a very pleasant story. It deals with immaturity, prejudice, betrayal, and revenge. One day, if God allows me to write as an old man, I will

tell the story. But until then it will remain a private part of my history.

3. Romans 7:15-25
4. Hebrews 3:12-13 and Hebrews 10:26 and 2 Peter 2:20-22.

### Chapter 12:

1. Seidman, Chris. January 25-27, 2002. "Christ in You". A sermon at Gateway-Get-A-Way. Pensacola, Florida.
2. Ezekiel 1:4
3. Job 1:16
4. Franklin, Ben. 1958. **Autobiography and Other Writings**. Pg. 122. Edited by Russell B. Nye. Houghton Mifflin Company.
5. Comfort, Ray. 1989. **Hell's Best Kept Secret**. Pg. 104. Whitaker House.

### Chapter 13:

1. Lucado, Max 2001. **Traveling Light**. Pg 91. W Publishing Group.
2. Lewis, C.S. 1961. **A Grief Observed**. Pg. 52. HarperSanFrancisco.
3. Swindoll, R. Charles. 1996. **Man to Man**. pg. 143. Zondervan Publishing House.
4. There have been many interpretations of this account. I have spoken with some Christians who believe that John was questioning Jesus' claim to be the Son of God. I have heard others conclude that John was in such a state of despair that his final longing was to be certain that his life of preaching Christ had not been in vain. I suppose any view could work in its own way, but I have chosen this position because of Jesus' answer, because I have found a certain measure of sarcasm in all of my Christian companions, and because this particular view fits so well with those who are wallowing in sorrow and grief.

5. Matthew 14:3-11
6. Luke 1:41
7. Matthew 14:3-11

#### **Chapter 14:**

1. Many people still ask if I could tell a difference in my athletic performance after following this diet. I'm not sure. I had started the "no sugar" diet during my sophomore year after reading an article in a nutrition book concerning the harmful effects of sugar. The Men's Health magazines convinced me to stay away from fried foods. I treated myself to an occasional Yoo-Hoo but even cut those out the summer before my senior year. That entire year, all I drank was water and milk. All I ate were fruits, vegetables, and meats. I could not bear the thought of looking back [to my senior basketball season] years later and saying to myself, "If only you had done more."
2. The Iron Man Award was given to any student who could bench his body weight 10 times and squat 150 percent of his body weight 10 times.
3. 1 Peter 5:8
4. Romans 3:23

# *Thank You*

To my parents and brother for your example, love, and upbringing. Thank you for life.

To Dr. Jamie Andersen. Thank you for your friendship and guidance in class.

To Susanna Bolding, Russell Burt, and Clint Carroll. You guys are so awesome! Thanks for your solid friendship and the encouragement you have been to me. I will never forget the road trips to Chattanooga. Do not forget the haunted chapel at Mentone! Russell and Clint — remember that Nascar race at O'Charley's?

To J.C. Choate for publishing this book.

To Billy Colburn — For your spiritual, daddy-like character offered to your students at Fort Payne High School and to every young person whom you meet.

To Dr. Gerard Elfstrom, Racheal Hamilton, Paul Nachim, Susan Piper, and David Spiece, for your advice and critiques in this manuscript.

To Willie Franklin — Thank you for your guidance in love and relationships.

To Jeff Galle for staying up with me all night advising me through the final revision. Thank you for believing in this book.

To Jonathan Gentry, Daniel Gentry, and Randy Turner. No words, brothers. Thanks for always being there and keeping my spiritual life in line. The trips to Faulkner, Exposure, and Lads-to-Leaders were the best!

To Dr. Donnie Hilliard for reading the manuscript and writing the Foreword. Thanks for our talks.

To Wess Howell — How can I express in words how great of a friend and brother you are?

To Nathan Kidwell — Thanks for coming to Tim's funeral and being there for me countless times. Thanks for caring — thanks for taking me to Backwoods.

To Danny Lacey and the board of Horizon Bank. Thanks for the job that you provided me as I worked my way through my freshman year of college at Northeast State, and thanks for allowing me to attend the Christian rallies and lectureships that have helped mold my character.

To Dr. Leanne Lamke for your class on Interpersonal Skills — a huge impression in Chapter 2.

To Barbara Oliver for her editing and enduring patience.

To John Rice — For your love for the lost and those four-hour question-and-answer sessions at Backwoods.

To my school teachers and friends in the community of Fyffe, Alabama. Thank you for your encouragement and the kind words that you have expressed throughout the years. No matter what God has planned for me, I will never forget such a wonderful group of people.

To the faculty and staff of Northeast Community College. Thanks for your continual support and my position in work-study. Special thanks to Daphne Huntley, Mark Webb, Ann Everett, Jim Rowland and the Northeast Maintenance Crew.

To the elders and families in the churches at Fort Payne, Madison, Opelika, West Mains, and Auburn! Thank you for your guidance and the training that you provided for me.

Finally, to all the youth ministers, ministers, shepherds, and helpers in the Lord's army,

**“Who makes His angels spirits and His ministers a flame of fire”  
(Psalms 104:4).**

**“One thousand shall flee at the threat of one, at the threat of five  
you shall flee, till you are left as a pole on top of a mountain and as  
a banner on a hill” (Isaiah 30:17).**

I salute you with a holy kiss. You are leaders in the most powerful army on this earth. May God's loving-kindness and comforting words keep you and your families on fire and strengthen you in your running with the breastplate of faith.

**“Therefore my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord” (1 Corinthians 15:58).**



